BRITAIN'S BEST MILITARY HISTORY MAGAZINE

HISTORY of WAR

ROGUE HEROES: 1943
SAS behind the lines in Operation Husky

BATTLE FOR SICILY

★ Tactics of the amphibious invasion

★ Inside the first Allied paratrooper assault

★ Critical lessons learned for D-Day

POLAND'S FORGOTTEN V-2 HEIST

FRANCE'S PILOT ACES
Rise, fall and resurrection of the republic's formidable air force

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FUTURE
ISSUE 121

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Paratroopers leap from Dakota aircraft during the Allies' invasion of Sicily in 1943

SCAN TO GET OUR WEEKLY NEWSLETTER

CONTRIBUTORS

GAVIN MORTIMER

A renowned expert in the history of the British special forces, this issue Gavin recounts how, at the brink of collapse, the SAS was reborn during the fierce fight for Sicily. Starting on page 30, read how the regiment applied its deadly covert skills to spearhead the Allied invasion.

DR BEN WHEATLEY

Ben is an honorary research fellow at the University of East Anglia's School of History. Ahead of the publication of his new book *The Panzers of Prokhorovka*, Ben discusses how, 80 years ago, German and Soviet commanders prepared for the huge armoured offensive (p44).

IAIN MACGREGOR

Iain is an historian, public speaker and author, with books published on a range of topics from the Battle of Stalingrad to the American Civil War. This issue he recounts the Gettysburg campaign of 1863, which culminated in the devastating defeat of Robert E Lee's Confederate army (p36).

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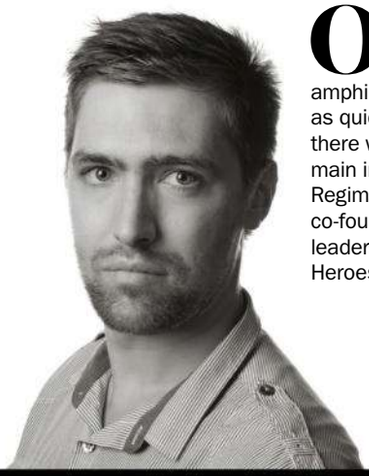
Welcome



Operation Husky, the Allied invasion of Sicily in 1943, marked the beginning of the end for Europe's Axis powers. It was an immense effort of combined arms, involving naval, air and land forces, with amphibious and airborne landings deployed to overrun the enemy's defences as quickly as possible. However, as Gavin Mortimer discusses this issue, there were also a number of small special forces units working ahead of the main invasion. Fresh out of their successful deployment in North Africa, the Regiment was reeling from several setbacks – not least the capture of their co-founder and commander, Captain David Stirling. Nonetheless, under new leadership and with a tougher training and selection process, these 'Rogue Heroes' were ready to wreak havoc on Italian soil.

Tim Williamson
Editor-in-Chief

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TURN TO PAGE 50

CONTENTS ISSUE 121

BATTLE FOR SICILY

24 Read how in Operation Husky, the Allies combined air, sea and land forces to launch the first major invasion of Axis Europe

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FRONTLINE

FRENCH AIR FORCE

12 **TIMELINE**
A leader in militarising early aircraft, France's Armée de l'Air grew to be a global force

16 **FLEDGELING EAGLES**
During the First World War, French pilots dominated the skies over the Western Front

18 **LAFAYETTE ESCADRILLE**
In 1916 a special unit of US pilots was created, named after the Revolutionary War leader

20 **THE BATTLE OF FRANCE**
The inter-war period left French air power diminished and unprepared for the Luftwaffe

22 **COLD WAR**
Out of the ashes of WWII, the Armée de l'Air rebuilt into a nuclear deterrent and modern air force

12

62

06 **WAR IN FOCUS**
Stunning imagery from throughout history

24 **BATTLE FOR SICILY**
Read how this major Allied invasion stormed Mussolini's Mediterranean fortress

30 **SAS IN SICILY**
Gavin Mortimer reveals the covert British missions behind the lines in Operation Husky

GREAT BATTLES

36 **GETTYSBURG**
Iain MacGregor gives a blow-by-blow account of the pivotal, and bloody, Civil War battle

44 **PREPARING FOR KURSK**
Dr Ben Wheatley on how Nazi and Soviet commanders planned for the coming armoured showdown

VICTORIA CROSS HERO

52 **AUBREY COSENS**
This Canadian sergeant stormed three enemy positions during the 1945 invasion of Germany

OPERATOR'S HANDBOOK

56 **VICKERS MEDIUM MK1 TANK**
An inter-war design that served as a training platform for the Royal Armoured Corps

62 **WWII'S FORGOTTEN V-2 HEIST**
Overlooked story of the RAF and Polish Army's mission to smuggle a Nazi rocket

66 **BATTLE OF JINGXING**
Read about one of ancient China's most staggering against-the-odds battlefield victories

52

74

71 HOMEFRONT

72 **MUSEUMS & EVENTS**
A roundup of exhibitions and collections

74 **WWII THIS MONTH**
Key Second World War events in photos

76 **REVIEWS**
The latest military history books and films

79 **COMPETITION**
Win a Airfix 'Dambusters' model kit

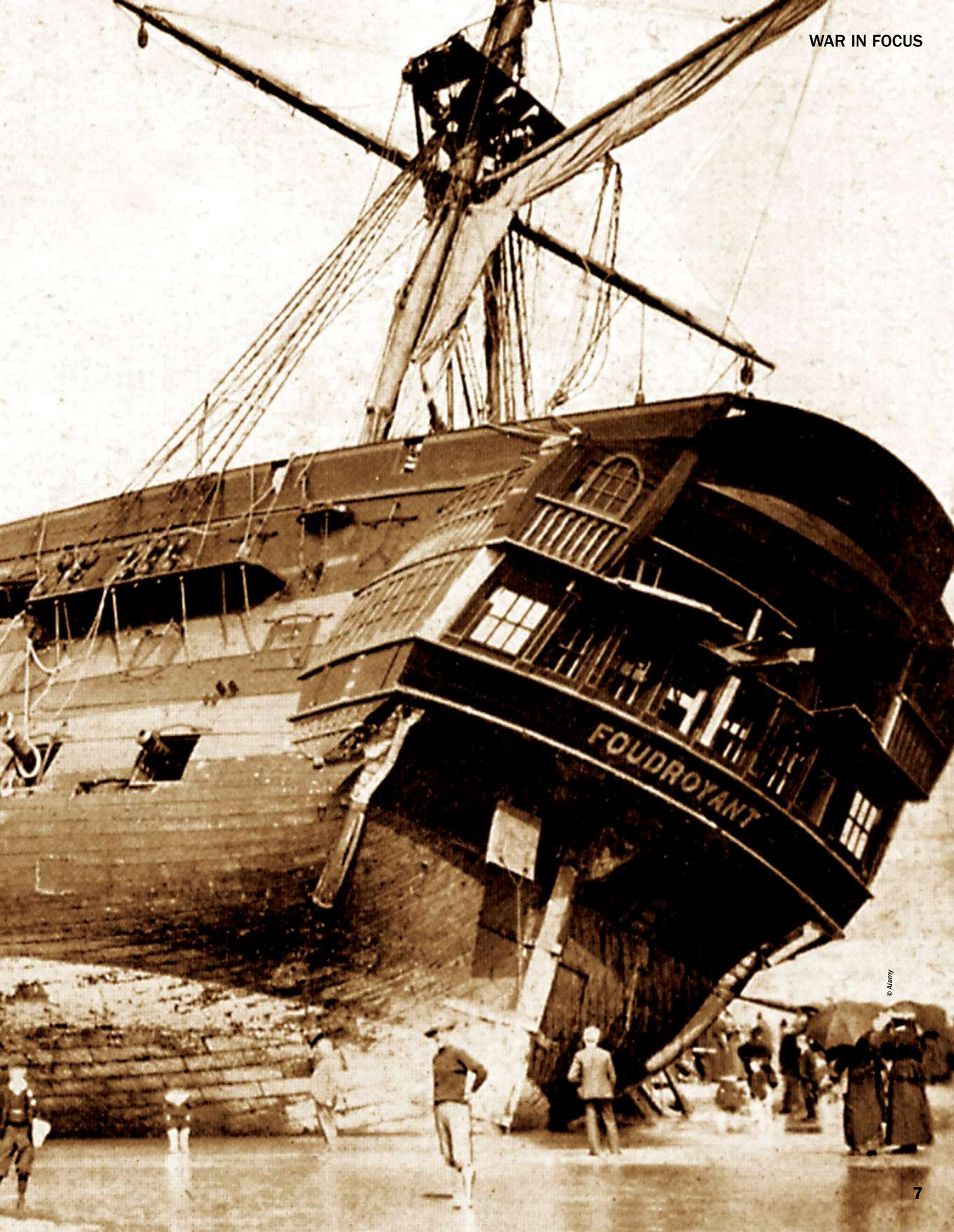
82 **ARTEFACT OF WAR**
Stern carving of the HMS Royal Charles

WAR in FOCUS

NELSON'S WRECKED FLAGSHIP

June 1897

An 80-gun Royal Navy ship of the line, HMS Foudroyant was launched in 1798. It served during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars and was Admiral Horatio Nelson's flagship during 1799-1800. It was while Foudroyant was in Naples harbour that Nelson began his affair with Lady Emma Hamilton. Foudroyant saw action against the French in 1806 and later acted as a training vessel before it was sold in 1891. It was briefly a museum ship before it foundered on Blackpool Sands during a violent storm on 16 June 1897.



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WAR in FOCUS

THE RUINS OF REIMS

1917

French soldiers clear rubble in Reims in a rare colour photo from the First World War. Known as La Cité des Sacres (The Coronation City), Reims Cathedral was the traditional location for the coronations of the kings of France. From 1874, the city was one of the French Army's chief defences along the northern approaches to Paris. The Germans briefly captured Reims in September 1914, with their bombardment severely damaging the cathedral. The French soon recaptured the city but the Germans continued to bombard Reims for the rest of the war.

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WAR in FOCUS

PRICKLY CUSTOMERS

1943

Australian soldiers take shelter behind a cactus during training in Australia. During the Second World War, almost a million Australian men and women (one-seventh of the population) served in the country's armed forces. Prime Minister Robert Menzies declared war on Germany on 3 September 1939 to support Britain, and Australians fought with distinction in North Africa, the Mediterranean, Europe, Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Australia itself also came under direct attack for the first time when Japanese aircraft and submarines attacked coastal towns and cities such as Darwin and Sydney.

TIMELINE OF THE...

FRENCH AIR FORCE

France pioneers military aviation in the early 20th century, with the Armée de l'Air fighting in conflicts ranging from the World Wars to the War on Terror

RIF WAR 02

Aéronautique Militaire aircraft are deployed to French Morocco during the Rif War between the breakaway Republic of Rif in Spanish Morocco and the combined forces of Spain and France. The French conduct aerial operations against Berber tribesmen.

1909-12 | 1914-18 | 1925-34 | August 1933

One of Aéronautique Militaire's original aircraft is the Blériot XI, an early monoplane that makes the first powered human flight across the English Channel

AÉRONAUTIQUE MILITAIRE 01

The French recognise the potential of military aviation and from 1909 train army soldiers to fly. The Aéronautique Militaire forms in 1910 as the aviation branch of the French Army and is officially established in 1912. This is the world's first effective 'air force'.

FIRST WORLD WAR

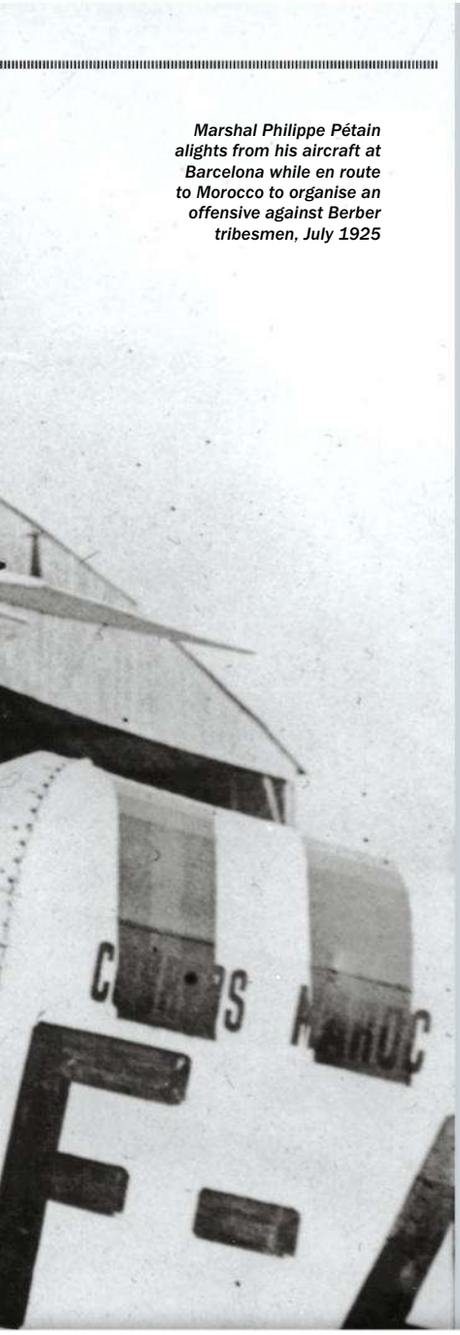
Aéronautique Militaire uses thousands of aircraft in combat on the Western Front, including fighters and bombers. Innovative French aircraft include the Nieuport and SPAD fighter biplanes. By 1918, Aéronautique Militaire is the world's largest air force.

An early colour photograph by Fernand Cuville (1887-1927) of a Nieuport 17 fighter at Aisne, France, c.1917

ARMÉE DE L'AIR

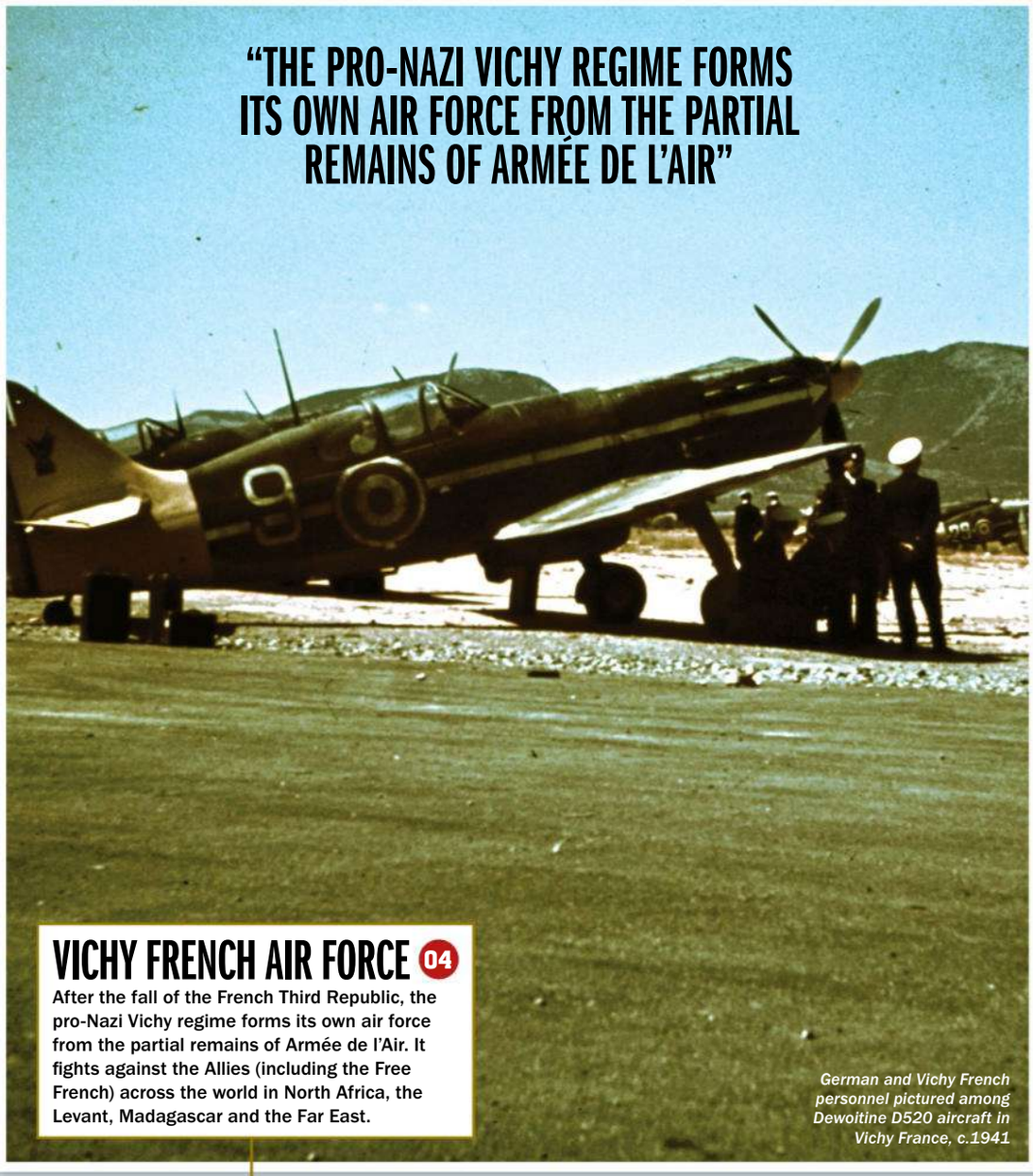
France's air force is renamed Armée de l'Air when it gains operational independence from the French Army. However, French military aviation programmes remain inadequate during the 1930s compared to the rise of Nazi Germany's Luftwaffe.

A row of Dewoitine D510 monoplane fighters, c.1938



Marshal Philippe Pétain alights from his aircraft at Barcelona while en route to Morocco to organise an offensive against Berber tribesmen, July 1925

"THE PRO-NAZI VICHY REGIME FORMS ITS OWN AIR FORCE FROM THE PARTIAL REMAINS OF ARMÉE DE L'AIR"



German and Vichy French personnel pictured among Dewoitine D520 aircraft in Vichy France, c.1941

VICHY FRENCH AIR FORCE 04

After the fall of the French Third Republic, the pro-Nazi Vichy regime forms its own air force from the partial remains of Armée de l'Air. It fights against the Allies (including the Free French) across the world in North Africa, the Levant, Madagascar and the Far East.

June 1940 – December 1942

10 May – 25 June 1940

17 June 1940 – 8 May 1945

BATTLE OF FRANCE 03

Despite being one of the largest in the world, the French Air Force is swiftly defeated during the German invasion of France. It is beset by obsolete aircraft, equipment, communications and military doctrine that enables the Luftwaffe to shoot down many French fighters and bombers.

Wrecked French military aircraft pictured destroyed on the ground after being attacked by German forces, June 1940

FREE FRENCH AIR FORCES 05

The Free French form aerial forces in England to fight the Axis powers, including their Vichy opponents. They form nine Allied fighter groups – including three RAF squadrons – and fly a mixture of French, British and American aircraft.

Squadron Leader Bernard Duperier of 340 'Île-de-France' Free French Squadron sits in his Spitfire at RAF Biggin Hill, 17 December 1942

Images © Alamy, Getty, Wiki / PD / Gov

1940-43

FRENCH NORTH AFRICA 06

The Free French and Vichy French battle for aerial supremacy over their colonial possessions in North Africa. They fly alongside their Allied or Axis partners in operations such as the Battle of Dakar and Operation Torch.

USAAF officers present Curtiss P-40 fighters to the Free French at Casablanca

1942-45

EASTERN FRONT 07

The Free French Normandie-Niemen Squadron is deployed to fight alongside Soviet forces on the Eastern Front. The squadron is soon expanded into a regiment and serves with distinction, flying thousands of sorties and shooting down hundreds of Axis aircraft.

Yakovlev Yak-3 aircraft of the Normandie-Niemen Squadron at Le Bourget Airport after returning from the Soviet Union, 20 June 1945

13 March – 7 May 1954

BATTLE OF DIEN BIEN PHU 08

Dien Bien Phu is a besieged French airstrip in Indochina. During a decisive defeat against the Viet Minh, the French Air Force drop parachute supplies over the defended airstrip but lose dozens of aircraft, with hundreds more being damaged.

Viet Minh commander General Vo Nguyen Giap views the wreckage of French aircraft

OPERATION BARKHANE 12

The French Air Force operates as part of a counter-insurgency campaign against Islamist groups in the Sahel region of North Africa. They conduct airstrikes on jihadist positions, with transport aircraft proving important to support thousands of French soldiers, particularly in Mali.

A French Air Force Airbus A-400 Atlas waits to be loaded with vehicles and soldiers at the French Army base at Gao, Mali, 5 December 2021

GULF WAR 10

Under the codename Opération Daguet, the French Air Force operates as part of the wider US-led coalition against Iraqi forces. It is the first major deployment of French aerial forces since the 1950s.

French SEPECAT Jaguar jet fighters line up for takeoff at Al Ahsa, Saudi Arabia, 19 January 1991

1954-62 — 1990-91 — 1 August 2014 – 9 November 2022

2001-14

ALGERIAN WAR 09

As their colonial empire crumbles, France adopts counter-insurgency aerial warfare in Algeria. Primarily using American bomber and reconnaissance aircraft, French air forces pioneer helicopter combat warfare. They also use napalm against Algerian nationalist guerrilla fighters.

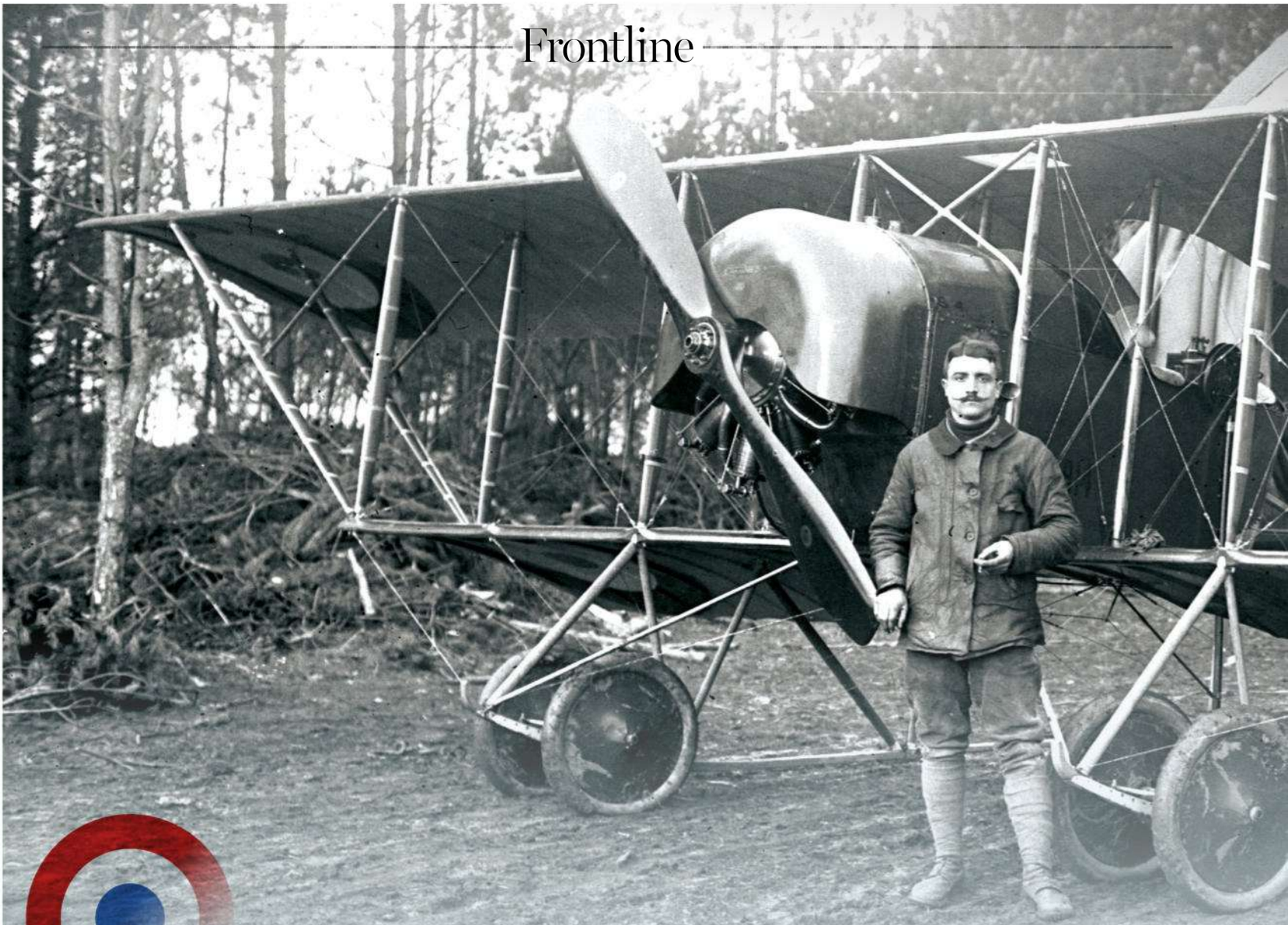
General Georges Parlange, commander of the Aurès-Nemenchtas region, sits in a helicopter alongside rebel chief Ali Kerbadou, after the latter surrendered, 24 December 1955

WAR IN AFGHANISTAN 11

Opération Héraclès is the French air and naval component of the NATO force in Afghanistan following the 9/11 attacks. Based across the country, over 300 air force personnel operate fighter and transport aircraft, helicopters and drones against the Taliban and other opposing Afghan forces.

French pilots and crew at Kandahar Air Base, May 2008

Images © Alamy, Getty, Wiki / PD / Gov

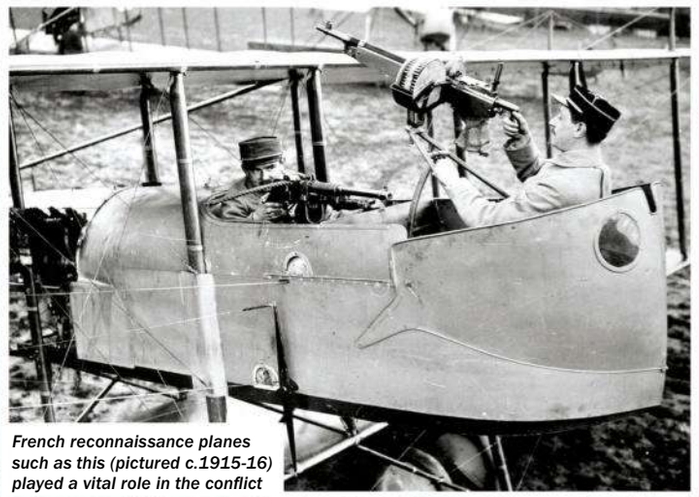


FLEDGLING EAGLES

The French contribution to the air battles of WWI was unmatched. A world leader in aviation, its pioneers and factories readily turned to supporting the war effort

The origins of the Armée de L'Air stretched back to the formation of the Aéronautique Militaire, born in 1909, in the country which had done more than any other to encourage the growth of aviation since its inception in 1903. While the United States may have been the birthplace of crewed, powered flight, France was its cradle. It was to France that designers and pilots looked, and usually went, to train, develop ideas and take part in the greatest aviation meetings in the world, while much of the language of aircraft and aviation that is still in use today was derived from French terminology.

It is unsurprising, then, that an army air service began to be established in 1909, the world's first military aeroplane unit, although it would take several years to field a fully rounded force. By the outbreak of the First World War, the Aéronautique Militaire fielded 21 escadrilles, or squadrons, each with six aircraft. The force immediately made its presence felt, when aerial reconnaissance provided information vital to blocking the German advance on Paris at the Battle of the Marne, saving France from defeat. Innovations followed in rapid succession, and in October 1914 the Aéronautique Militaire became the first air service to move away from the standard model of multi-role aircraft and units, organising its escadrilles into designated bomber, fighter and reconnaissance roles while developing suitable specialist aircraft. On 5 October, Sergeant Joseph Frantz and Corporal Louis Quenault became the first aircrew ever to shoot down an enemy aircraft, and fighter pilots began to experiment with various forms of forwards-firing machine guns. In April 1915, Roland Garros became the first pilot to shoot down an enemy aircraft with a machine gun firing through his propeller, repeating the feat twice more before falling victim to ground fire and being captured at the end of the month. In July 1915, Adolphe Pégoud became the world's first fighter 'ace'



French reconnaissance planes such as this (pictured c.1915-16) played a vital role in the conflict

Adolphe Pégoud was the world's first fighter 'ace', shooting down six enemy planes during WWI

A pilot with his Caudron aircraft. The French company built planes for the military in WWI and WWII

(a term coined and popularised by the French press), eventually shooting down six enemy aircraft. Both Garros and Pégoud had been pioneering pre-war pilots.

There is more to an air force than simply shooting down the enemy, and the Aéronautique Militaire developed aerial photography, artillery observation and bombing skills as well. By February 1916, their strength had grown to over 1,100 aircraft in specialised units, just in time to enter what historian Entiene du Durand calls "the first air battle": Verdun. As the Germans launched their offensive against the French forces, they were supported by massed air power, and the Aéronautique Militaire responded in kind. Escadrilles were thrown into the battle in greater numbers and a haphazard fashion. Historian Ted Hooton explains that, going into the Battle of Verdun, "on both sides air power was fragmented with squadrons dispersed among ground commands (army groups, armies and army corps) that retained operational control, the generals' blinkered views counting more than the experience of air officers who were often regarded as mere technical advisors". That all changed as the Aéronautique Militaire became more organised, forming their escadrilles into larger groupement of several units, pooling resources and, just as importantly, expertise. They shared ideas and developed doctrines, allowing the systematic exploration of this new type of warfare, and the application of its lessons. Through 1917 and 1918, the massing of more and more units into ever larger groups allowed the ever greater concentration of air power.

"THE AÉRONAUTIQUE MILITAIRE WERE ABLE TO TAKE A MORE FLEXIBLE APPROACH TO THEIR FLYING SERVICES THAN THE BRITISH"

The Aéronautique Militaire were able to take a more flexible approach to their flying services than the British, and in a similar way to the German methods moved their units more readily across different regions to meet specific needs, achieving localised concentrations to meet certain threats or achieve specific aims. The crews and attitude were similarly more flexible than the British attitude of constant aggression and attack. The leading fighter ace of the war, Manfred von Richthofen (The Red Baron), would claim that he always preferred attacking British aircraft because you knew what to expect – they would turn to face you and fight, whereas the French played 'tricks' and were unpredictable.

Underpinning the Aéronautique Militaire was the blossoming French aviation industry. Throughout the war, France would provide huge numbers of aircraft and engines to their British allies, and (proportionally) even more to the Italians, Belgians and, later, American flying services. By the end of the war in November 1918, France dominated the air war on the Western Front. Although the British Royal Air Force (RAF) had a much greater total strength, across the main theatre in France and Belgium the Aéronautique Militaire was able to field a front line strength of around 3,200 aircraft, compared to 1,750 RAF, 130 Belgian and 180 American aircraft. Sadly, 1918 would prove a peak for both the Aéronautique Militaire and the French aircraft industry for half a century, but the immense contribution of French air power to victory on the Western Front was beyond doubt.

Images: Alamy, Getty, Wiki / PD / Gov

LAFAYETTE ESCADRILLE

During WWI, the burgeoning French Air Force formed a squadron of volunteer American pilots who served France with distinction over the Western Front

Although the United States played an important role in securing victory for the Allies in 1918, the country did not declare war on Germany until 6 April 1917. Most Americans agreed with President Woodrow Wilson's initial stance on neutrality, although pro-Allied sentiment grew as the war progressed.

Within the United States, some members of the population – such as Irish-Americans – were hostile to helping Britain but there was less antipathy towards the French. France was America's oldest ally and when German forces invaded northern France in 1914, some Americans believed it was vital that the United States join the war.

A small group of Americans, including Norman Prince and Dr Edmund Gros, developed the idea of forming a volunteer unit of American pilots to fly with the relatively new Aéronautique Militaire in the French Army. Prince was an expatriate living in France who was already flying for the French while Gros was the founder of the American Hospital of Paris. They successfully lobbied the French government, who approved the idea in August 1915. The French recognised that a special unit of American fliers within Aéronautique Militaire would have excellent propaganda value to further US support for the Allies.

On 21 March 1916, the French Air Department authorised the creation of the Escadrille Américaine. An escadrille was a small squadron that was the basic independent aviation unit in the French Army. Although the Escadrille Américaine was composed of American volunteer pilots it was commanded by a Frenchman, Captain Georges Thenault. Five other officers and the escadrille's mechanics were also French, with the pilots wearing French uniforms and flying French aircraft.

At its creation, the escadrille only consisted of seven American pilots, although that number grew to 38. Initially deployed to Luxeuil-les-Bains near the Swiss border, the majority of the pilots were amateurs, with many effectively learning to fly on their first combat patrols. They did not stay at Luxeuil-les-Bains for long and were soon flying above the major theatres of the Western Front.

Dogfights and decorations

On 18 May 1916, Lieutenant Kiffin Rockwell shot down a German observation plane over Alsace, making him the first American to shoot down an enemy aircraft during the conflict. Rockwell was awarded the Médaille Militaire

***Below:** Sergeant Edward F Hinkle stands in front of his aircraft, which was the first to carry the American flag over French lines*

Pilots of Lafayette Escadrille pictured with their mascots, including two dogs (Archie and Bright White) as well as – extraordinarily – two lions called Whiskey and Soda

and Croix de Guerre for his action, although he was shot down and killed a few months later on 23 September 1916.

Rockwell's aerial victory demonstrated the burgeoning skill of the Escadrille Américaine but his death also showed the dangers the volunteer pilots were willing to face. The escadrille saw combat over major battles including Verdun, the Somme and Ypres. As well as directly engaging in combat with German fighters, the pilots escorted Allied bombers behind enemy lines. They flew a limited variety of biplanes that included the Nieuport 11 and 17 as well as the SPAD VII. Aerial warfare was in its infancy and these aircraft were flimsy with unreliable engines and machine guns that often jammed.

Accidents killed just as many pilots as the enemy. This included the escadrille's founding member Prince, who was fatally injured after his aircraft struck telegraph cables near his airbase in October 1916. Nevertheless, the pilots were determined and produced several flying aces. Prince was officially credited with five aerial victories while Raoul Lufbery, a French-born American citizen, scored 16 victories.

By the end of 1916 the escadrille had become famous, and the Germans were acutely aware of its existence. Because America was still officially neutral at this stage, the German government lodged a complaint with the United States. In response, Escadrille Américaine was renamed Lafayette Escadrille. Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette, had been an important French commander during the American Revolutionary War and the name change was intended to imply that the United States was allied to France rather than being neutral.

"MY BURIAL IS OF NO IMPORT. MAKE IT AS EASY AS POSSIBLE FOR YOURSELVES... GOOD LUCK TO THE REST OF YOU. GOD DAMN GERMANY AND VIVE LA FRANCE"

'God damn Germany'

Hundreds more Americans travelled to France to join the escadrille. Their numbers became so large that the French had to form an expanded Lafayette Flying Corps. The corps ultimately shot down c.150-200 German aircraft. These statistics were accompanied with the awarding of four Légion d'honneurs – France's highest decoration – along with dozens of other awards. In total, 69 corps members died during the war, including in the original escadrille, with 42 being killed in direct combat.

Lafayette Escadrille was disbanded on 8 February 1918 and 12 of its members were transferred to the US 103rd Aero Squadron. The 103rd was an effective continuation of the escadrille and claimed a further 45 aerial victories before the Armistice. By this time, the heroic deeds of Lafayette Escadrille had become legendary.

Their fighting spirit was summed up by one of their fallen pilots, James Rogers McConnell, who was the last American to die under French command before the US entered the war. He was shot down over Saint-Quentin on 19 March 1917 and his final letter, which was found among his effects, was defiant and brimming with esprit de corps: "My burial is of no import. Make it as easy as possible for yourselves… Good luck to the rest of you. God damn Germany and vive la France."

Images: Getty, Wiki / PD / Gov

REARMAMENT & THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

France entered Second World War while still suffering the effects of the First. Out-thought as much as out-fought, the Armée de L'Air was left ill-equipped in both mindset and aircraft

France had been exhausted by the First World War, and the economic resources and political will were lacking to spend money on military equipment in the 1920s and early 1930s. By the mid-1930s, when the threat from Germany became obvious, the French military and aircraft industry were in a very poor state. Rapid modernisation would prove to be too little, too late.

The Armée de L'Air was formed from the Aéronautique Militaire as an independent air arm in 1934, but it continued to suffer from doctrinal, political and economic problems. Rapid changes in government created little continuity in policy and priorities, leading to problems with funding. Corners were cut with the use of multi-role aircraft intended for adaptation to a range of different capabilities, although inevitably such aircraft became a mess of compromises and fell short in all tasks. Only in 1936 did the need to rearm spark development of effective modern aircraft, in particular fighters, such as the Morane Saulnier MS406 and Dewoitine D520. Even then the tendency was to cut corners, with aircraft like the Potez 630 twin-engined fighter being built with one eye on producing bomber and reconnaissance variants.

However, the aircraft industry was in no fit state to produce modern aircraft. It was still largely a cottage industry, based around small companies with workshops staffed by highly skilled craftsmen. Lack of government funding meant that most aircraft were built in small production runs, and larger factories were not needed. For rearmament to start, two years of effort were needed just to prepare the industry for the task. This process was marred by continual changes in government, constant friction with trade unions and by lack of funding as the French military prioritised the construction of the Maginot Line along their border with

Germany. Some of these issues could have been circumvented by purchasing foreign aircraft, and indeed small numbers were ordered from overseas, but again the trade unions interceded with the socialist governments to prevent, as they saw it, work being denied to their own members.

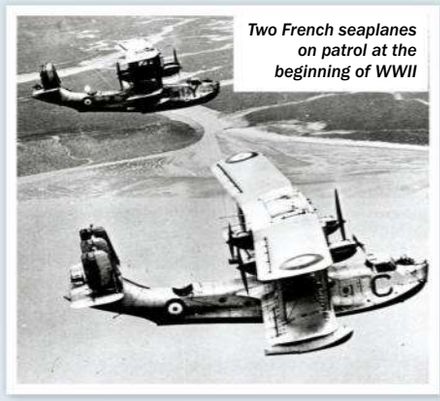
As war loomed, the situation worsened. While production had increased rapidly, from 40 aircraft per month in December 1938 to 300 in December 1939, it still took 18,000 man-hours to build a Dewoitine D520, against the 5,000 it took the Germans to build the comparable Messerschmitt Bf 109. On the outbreak of war conscription further hampered efforts. With no system of reserved occupations as used by other countries, skilled workers were called away from the factories to spend long months of inactivity on the Maginot Line. Despite this, Herculean efforts were made in the spring of 1940. Output increased to 500 modern aircraft in May 1940, but by then it was too late.

All of these problems left the Armée de L'Air badly outnumbered in modern aircraft upon the outbreak of war. Doctrine was also a problem. Unlike the Royal Air Force in the UK, the French force had had little time to forge its own identity and ideas, and was still closely wedded to the army's battlefield-centric view of the coming war. Units were split up and attached directly to army groups. Command structures became confused and unclear, while army commanders were uneven in their application of air power. The French chief of staff of national defence, General Maurice Gamelin, had remarked before the war that "there is no such thing as a battle of the air, only a battle on the ground", and France lacked any co-ordinated doctrine or procedures for the use of aircraft. Some commanders would embrace their air assets, while others would virtually ignore their squadrons and leave them languishing on the ground.

The Armée de L'Air were left thinly spread. Its fighter force stood at just over 600 aircraft and around 700 pilots – compared to the almost 3,000 fighter pilots of the 'The Few' that defended Britain in 1940. Bomber forces were equally small and dispersed. Historian Christopher Shores characterises the bomber force as "a heterogeneous collection of elderly types, none of them capable of operating by day with any realistic hope of survival (much less of success)". All forces suffered from low serviceability rates and lack of spares. The usefulness of French aircraft was also hampered by a mistrust of wireless communications, so that formations generally did not co-ordinate their actions with other aircraft or ground units, and re-direction of aircraft already in the air was rare, stifling flexibility.

When Germany launched their attack on Western Europe on 10 May 1940, the Armée de L'Air was ill-prepared to resist. Just like the tank forces on the ground, air units were scattered in small numbers and unable to work in any co-ordinated fashion, allowing the Germans to easily gain local superiority and overwhelm them. Despite this, the courage of individual aircrew was incredible, and the fighters in particular inflicted serious losses on the Luftwaffe, but they were unable to affect the ground campaign. Gamelin's statement became a self-fulfilling prophecy as the under-resourced and under-utilised air arm was unable to influence the ground war or prevent French defeat.

The Morane-Saulnier MS 406 was France's most widely used plane in WWII, with 1,037 built



Two French seaplanes on patrol at the beginning of WWII

French pilots pose with the black cross of a downed German plane

Images: Getty

COLD WAR

After the defeats and divisions of WWII, the Armée de L'Air struggled for aircraft and a role for them. Ironically, breaking away from NATO united the force behind a single aim

At the end of the Second World War the Armée de L'Air, like the French nation itself, was deeply damaged and divided. Parts of the Armée de L'Air had gone into exile with the Allies, some serving with the Soviets, but the majority flew with the Free French Forces in Western Europe. More had stayed in France under the Vichy Government, who had initially remained neutral (while defending their air space against Allied intruders) and later fought openly against the Allies in North Africa, Madagascar and the Middle East. The rifts between the different factions were slow to heal. Rapid demobilisation and re-organisation was needed to merge the former factions into a coherent whole, but political instability further undermined reconstruction. The air force would go through more than a dozen major reorganisations in 15 years as they struggled to re-establish France's place in the world.

Time was against the Armée de L'Air from the start. Even before the formal Japanese surrender in September 1945, a rebellion was breaking out in French Indo-China (Vietnam). Air power would be an important part of the campaign, offering close air support, reconnaissance, troop transporting and supply dropping to the forces on the ground, although it would be the failed defence of an airfield at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 that would see final French defeat. At that time, another war for independence, in Algeria, was starting, and in 1956 France was also involved in the coalition attack on Egypt. The constant friction of these low-intensity but persistent commitments would interfere with attempts to focus on the future.

Only in the 1960s did the Armée de L'Air find itself with a clear role and identity, as France announced a new defence posture. A founder member of NATO in 1948, in the 1950s the country become fully integrated into its command structure. However, from 1959 President Charles De Gaulle began a staged

"IT WOULD BE THE FAILED DEFENCE OF AN AIRFIELD AT DIEN BIEN PHU IN 1954 THAT WOULD SEE FINAL FRENCH DEFEAT"

The cutting-edge French fighter jet Dassault Mirage III, seen here in 1973, was capable of Mach 2

In the Cold War, the Armée de L'Air's primary focus became the delivery of an overwhelming nuclear strike

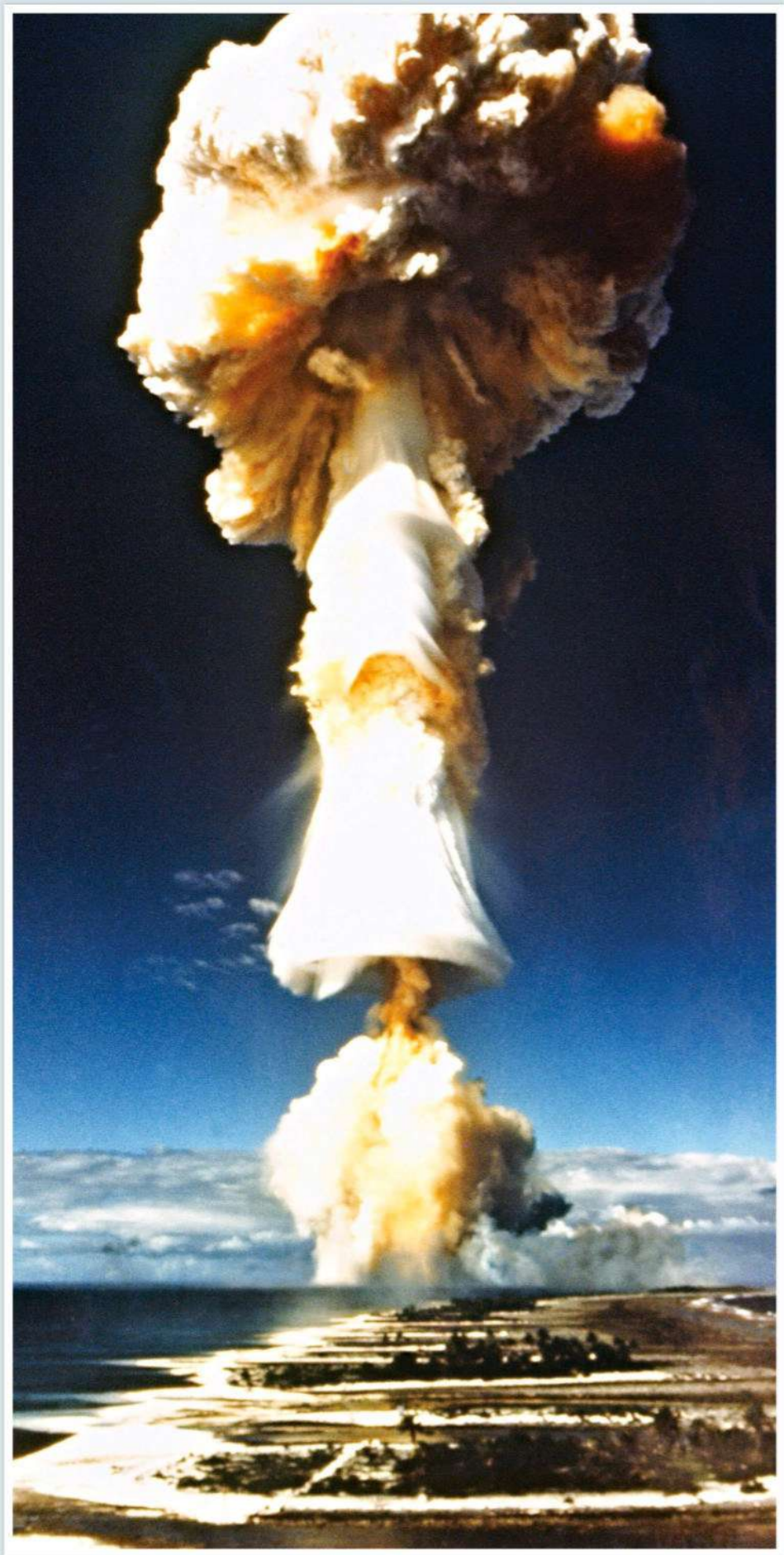
withdrawal from the military structures, wishing to gain greater independence from the (as they saw it) American-dominated NATO. By 1967, all non-French NATO forces had been evicted from France, including nuclear weapons. To replace the loss of defence, France developed an independent nuclear deterrent, testing its first bomb in 1960. From 1964, the Armée de L'Air took on responsibility for maintaining the deterrent, with their Dassault Mirage IV strike aircraft.

The new stance was unequivocal, and the Armée de L'Air was moulded around it with a clear-cut mission in mind. Nuclear strikes were seen as the first, last and only response to Soviet aggression. There was no concept of flexible responses, and very little investment was placed into conventional strike roles. The Armée de L'Air's primary focus became the delivery of an overwhelming nuclear strike, and the air defences needed to prevent a similar strike on France. Reconnaissance, intelligence gathering, transportation and conventional bombing all withered unless their role could also be performed by aircraft capable of taking part in a nuclear strike.

During this period, the Armée de L'Air would start to reap the benefits of France's revived aviation industry. The indigenous French aircraft industry had been subjugated to produce aircraft for the German Air Force during the war, producing aircraft under licence. Despite some remarkable achievements, such as the design of the Sud-Ouest 6000 Triton jet-powered aircraft in complete secrecy under the Germans' noses, France found itself a generation behind Britain and America in terms of technology, and reliant entirely on them for aircraft.

For the sake of national pride as well as economic reasons, it was imperative for France to modernise both its aviation industry and its air force. In 1947 a specification was announced for a jet-powered attack aircraft, and Dassault (successor of the old Bloch company) answered it with the M450 Ouragan. This fighter-bomber entered service in 1952, and within two years was being sold to both India and Israel against stiff American and British competition. The Dassault Mystére range followed, as did the Sud Aviation Vantour twin-engined bomber, both of which also enjoyed small export successes. However, it was the Mach-2 capable Dassault Mirage series of jet strike fighters, which entered service in 1961, that would prove a true world-beater and see service around the world into the following century.

The end of the Cold War found the Armée de L'Air a highly capable force within very set limits. The decade after the fall of the Soviet Union would reveal many cracks in their doctrine and equipment as they struggled to adapt to an era of limited, conventional, expeditionary warfare. Their showing in the First Gulf War of 1991 was poor, although rapid changes saw better performance over the Balkans and the Middle East in the years that followed. Three decades of nuclear tunnel vision had to be overturned to produce a flexible force with a full range of capabilities to deal with the post-Cold War world.



Images: Getty

BATTLE FOR SICILY

THE 'SOFT UNDERBELLY'

Eighty years ago, Allied forces invaded the Axis homeland for the first time in a huge, complex operation that involved airborne and amphibious landings

WORDS TOM GARNER

By 1943, the Allies were entering what Winston Churchill referred to as the "perhaps, the end of the beginning" of the Second World War. Axis forces had finally been driven out of North Africa and Allied commanders turned their attention to the wider strategy in the Mediterranean. With the Soviet Union fighting a brutal war against the Nazis on the Eastern Front, the Western Allies were expected to open a second front in Europe. The question was: where?

It was Churchill who advocated an invasion of Italy. Famously referring to the then-fascist country as the "soft underbelly of Europe", the British prime minister believed that knocking Italy out of the war had several benefits. Neutral Turkey could potentially join the Allies and Italy would be a useful springboard for Allied invasions into Austria and Germany. At worst, an Italian campaign would divert precious Axis resources away from the Eastern Front.

Although Churchill was enthusiastic about Italy, the United States was not. The Americans wanted to pour their European war resources into an invasion of northern France, which eventually became Operation Overlord. However, they did agree to invade Italy alongside their British partners with the first target being the country's most southerly region: Sicily.

Codenamed Operation Husky, the island invasion of Sicily was critical to a future assault on the Italian mainland. Using hundreds of thousands of troops, Husky was actually the largest Allied amphibious invasion of the war. It was also innovative, with the Allies launching large airborne operations for the first time and successfully deploying pioneering landing craft. However, despite their numerical and technological advantage, the Allies met larger than expected resistance and argued among themselves. The "soft underbelly" turned out to be not so soft after all.

Allied troops wade ashore in Sicily during Operation Husky, the success of which was crucial to a future assault on the Italian mainland

British airborne soldiers pictured in an Airspeed Horsa glider just before they fly to Sicily

Operation Ladbroke

The British conducted the first mass Allied airborne landing of the Second World War in a hazardous but successful operation to capture Syracuse. Prior to the invasion of Sicily, airborne operations during the war had been pioneered by German forces. The Fallschirmjäger branch of the Luftwaffe conducted combat airborne attacks during their invasions of Norway, the Netherlands and – most infamously – Crete. The Allies took careful note of these successes, with Churchill stating that airborne warfare was now a means "to be able to storm a series of water obstacles… everywhere from the Channel to the Mediterranean and in the East".

The British quickly developed their own airborne forces, including the Parachute Regiment and Glider Pilot Regiment. These, among other units, were formed into the 1st Airborne Division in 1941. Among the division's five brigades was the 1st Airlanding Brigade and 1st Parachute Brigade. These two brigades would participate in the invasion of Sicily and make Allied airborne history.

Returning to Europe

During complex planning in the build-up to the invasion, the Allies decided that the British would use three airborne brigades to capture the Ponte Grande and Primasole bridges as well as the port of Augusta. Meanwhile, units from the US 82nd Airborne Division would be dropped northeast of the port of Gela to prevent Axis reserves from attacking the Allied beaches.

The British decided to first capture the Ponte Grande bridge south of Syracuse. This mission, known as Operation Ladbroke, was to be conducted immediately prior to the amphibious landings on the night of 9 July 1943 under the command of Brigadier Philip Hicks, the commander of 1st Airlanding Brigade. As

"USING HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF TROOPS, HUSKY WAS ACTUALLY THE LARGEST ALLIED AMPHIBIOUS INVASION OF WWII"

well as capturing Ponte Grande, the brigade was also tasked with securing Syracuse – particularly the city's harbour.

Ladbroke was initially designed to involve paratroopers but Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery altered the plan so it would be a glider operation instead. This would primarily use infantry, with smaller numbers of artillery and engineers. Using gliders was risky, especially because the Allies were relatively inexperienced in airborne operations. Some RAF officers argued that a night glider operation would be impractical, while pilots from the Glider Pilot Regiment had to build their own aircraft.

Nevertheless, 144 American WACO CG-4 gliders, along with a small number of British Airspeed Horsa gliders, would transport over 2,000 British soldiers to Sicily from North Africa. Lieutenant Bernard H Halsall of the Glider Pilot Regiment recalled: "We had just over a week to study photographs and for all the other activities in preparation for the attack, culminating in a church service… This would be the first return to European soil by the Allies since Dunkirk."

***Right, top:** American paratroopers of US 82nd Airborne Division depart for daylight parachute drops over Sicily, 10 July 1943*

***Right, middle:** American paratroopers jump from their Dakota aircraft over Sicily, 10 July 1943*

***Right, bottom:** RAF instructors teach NCOs of the Glider Pilot Regiment to pilot troop-carrying gliders at a training school near Oxford, 8 October 1942*

Images: Alamy, Getty

'Into the darkness'

On the evening of 9 July 1943, the first British gliders took off from North Africa and were towed to Sicily by United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) Dakota aircraft. The visibility was poor, with glider pilots often losing sight of the Dakotas' safety lights. When the time came for the gliders to land, only 12 reached their designated landing zones. The majority landed some distance away, and many soldiers drowned when their gliders landed in the sea after being prematurely released from the Dakotas.

Halsall's WACO glider crashed. "We crossed the shoreline and flew on into the darkness," he recalled. "We hit the first tree of the olive grove at about 80mph [130kp/h]. Several minutes later, after we had all regained consciousness… we moved off in the direction of the firing."

One glider crew managed to capture Ponte Grande without difficulty but because most of the other aircraft had crashed or missed their landing zones, only a few dozen British soldiers (including Halsall) were able to defend the bridge from Italian forces. The British faced hundreds of Italian soldiers from 385th Coastal Battalion and 75th (Napoli) Infantry Regiment. Halsall recalled: "During the rest of the night and throughout the morning the enemy launched a series of vicious counterattacks." Such was the ferocity of the fighting that there were less than a dozen British soldiers left, including Halsall, on the afternoon of the second day of fighting. These men surrendered to the Italians but they were liberated in less than an hour by forward troops of the British Eighth Army who had landed during the amphibious operation.

The Eighth Army took Ponte Grande and Halsall was awarded the Military Cross for his bravery. His citation read: "He took over the defence of the Syracuse bridge and throughout several counterattacks showed coolness and courage and was an inspiration to all. It was due to his leadership that his sector held for 15 hours and credit showed to Lieutenant Halsall that the operation as a whole was a success."

Operation Ladbroke had indeed been a success but it came at a price. Around 25% of the airborne troops had become casualties, including 313 killed and 174 missing or wounded. In the aftermath of Ladbroke, the British increased training for glider pilots and no longer allowed gliders to be released at night over water. Inter-aircraft communication was also improved, and aircrews were trained in both glider and paratrooper operations.

Nevertheless, despite Ladbroke's costly shortcomings, Halsall recognised its importance: "History had been made that night of the 9th July 1943. This was the first mass landing by glider behind enemy lines by the Allies. Four more were to follow before the end of hostilities."

"WE HIT THE FIRST TREE OF THE OLIVE GROVE AT ABOUT 80MPH. SEVERAL MINUTES LATER, AFTER WE HAD ALL REGAINED CONSCIOUSNESS... WE MOVED OFF IN THE DIRECTION OF THE FIRING"

THE SHORES OF SICILY

A massive undertaking, the seaborne landings saw the disembarkation of hundreds of thousands of soldiers along the island's southern coast

Contrary to popular belief, D-Day was not the largest amphibious Allied invasion of the Second World War. It was actually the Sicilian coast that saw the most Allied soldiers go ashore, on 9 July 1943. During the Normandy landings, 156,000 Allied troops landed on enemy territory but for Sicily over 180,000 soldiers were deployed. The geographical breadth of the Allied invasion was also huge, with the Allies landing on 26 beaches along 105 miles (170km) of coastline.

Operation Husky was a truly international undertaking. Led by the Americans and British, the multinational Allied force also included Canadian, Free French, Indian and Australian troops along with some Sicilian partisans. Thousands of ships were also required to ferry the soldiers but the Allies first needed to have control of the air over Sicily. After the recapture of Tunisia, Allied bombers conducted tens of thousands of sorties against Axis airfields in southern Italy, Sardinia and particularly Sicily. By 9 July 1943, only two Axis airfields on the island remained operational.

With air superiority seemingly confirmed, the Allies focussed their plans on the amphibious landings, which involved 3,200 Allied vessels – the majority being from either the Royal Navy or US Navy. On the landing crafts, there would not just be hundreds of thousands of soldiers but also hundreds of tanks and thousands more mechanised vehicles.

Allied troops, guns and transport are rushed ashore ready for action, 10 July 1943

Soldiers stand up to their waists in water unloading stores while beach roads are prepared for heavy and light traffic, 10 July 1943

Eighth Army troops wade ashore onto the Sicilian coast from a landing craft

Opposing the Allies on Sicily were numerically superior Axis soldiers; 230,000 of these were Italian troops organised into coastal defence units while the Germans consisted of two divisions commanded by General Hans-Valentin Hube. The Italians had lost many of their best soldiers in North Africa but General Dwight D Eisenhower refused to be complacent. This would be the first time that an Axis nation would be defending its home soil and Eisenhower knew that this could more than likely cause the Italians to fight with great ferocity.

Stormy landings

The airborne operations were conducted on the night of 9-10 July 1943, with the seaborne landings beginning on the morning of 10 July. All Allied forces would land on the southern coast of Sicily, with the US Seventh Army landing on beaches around Licata, Gela and Scoglitti. Meanwhile, the British Eighth Army would land further east on beaches in the vicinity of Pachino and Syracuse.

The day of the invasion was hampered by adverse weather conditions. A storm caused heavy winds as the first Allied troops landed from 2.45am on 10 July. This made the amphibious landings difficult but the inclement weather surprised the Italian and German defenders, who believed that landings would not be attempted in such conditions. Allied vessels also had to contend with hidden shoals off the coast that delayed some landings by several hours.

Protected by six battleships, ten cruisers and two aircraft carriers, the Allies were able to successfully land on their beaches, despite the geographical distance between many of them. They were also greatly helped by their six-wheeled DUKW amphibious vehicles. Nicknamed 'Ducks', the DUKWs had only been in production since 1942 and Sicily was their first major operation. Hundreds were available for the invasion and they performed well. The American military magazine *Stars and Stripes* even reported that when Italian soldiers saw the vehicles emerging from the water they surrendered out of amazement.

Battle of Gela

Yet this anecdote does not accurately represent how Axis forces responded to the invasion. In many places the Italians and Germans fought fiercely, particularly at Gela. Located in the American landing sector, what became known as the Battle of Gela was fought during 10-12 July.

The Americans came under heavy attack by Axis forces at Gela, with German and Italian aircraft and tanks attacking ships and landing soldiers. The Americans suffered 2,300 casualties and the loss of the destroyer USS Maddox, which was bombed and sunk. These attacks continued until American soldiers captured Ponte Olivo Airfield. The Germans incurred hundreds of losses at Gela but the Italians suffered even more – over 10,000 casualties, including around 3,350 killed.

Elsewhere, Axis aircraft were still able to wreak havoc against the invaders despite diminished numbers. German aircraft sank the minesweeper USS Sentinel off Licata as well as the American landing ship LST-313. Italian Stukas also sank the British hospital ship HMHS Talamba, although all 400 of its wounded patients were safely evacuated.

Despite these setbacks, the seaborne landings were successful. During 10-14 July, hundreds of thousands of troops were disembarked from thousands of ships and covered by over 4,000 aircraft. General Sir Harold Alexander, the overall commander of Allied ground forces, was then able to establish a line from Licata in the west to Catania in the east from which the Allies could then operate to capture the rest of the island.

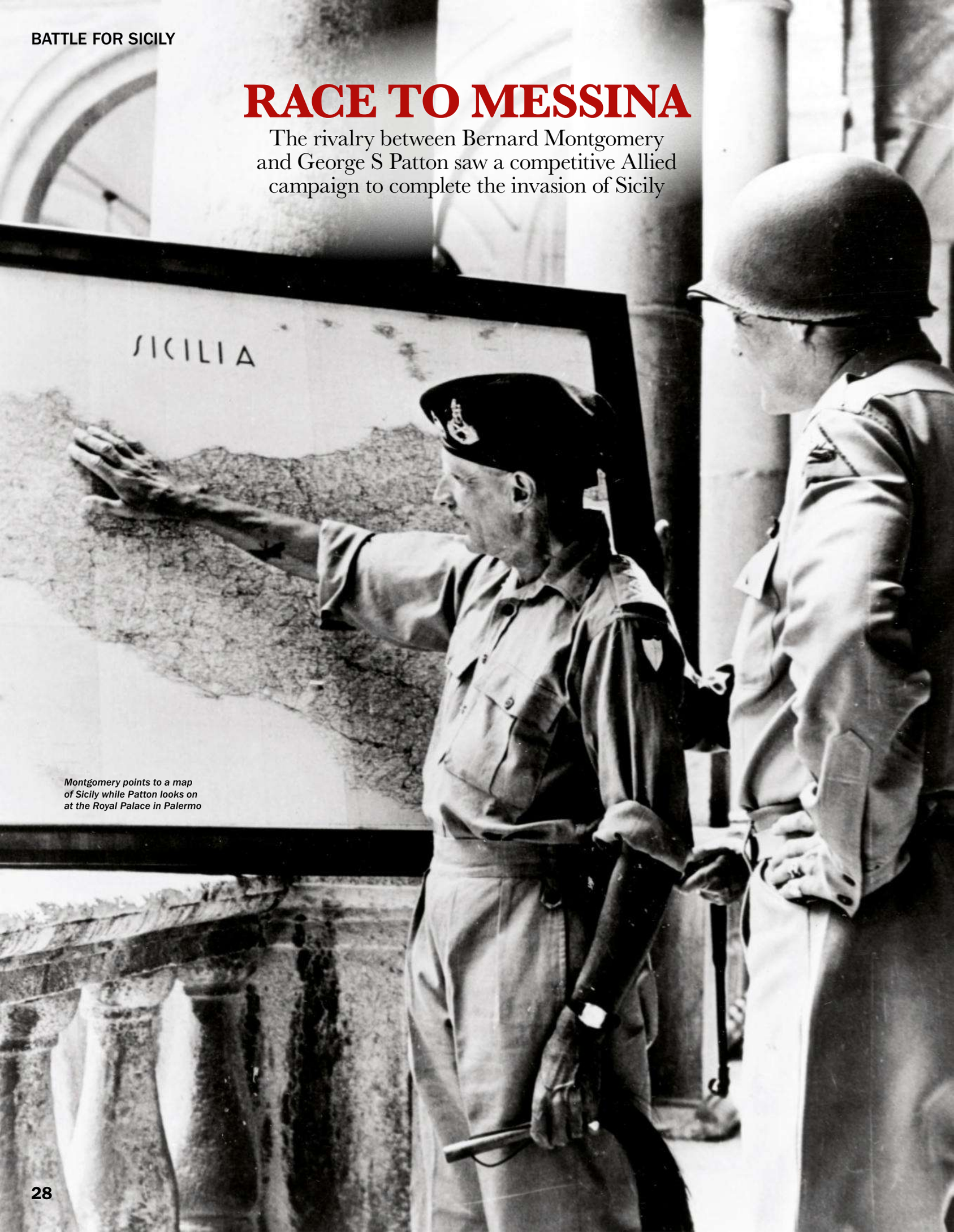
***Above:** American cargo ship SS Robert Rowan explodes after being hit by a German bomb off Gela, 11 July 1943*

***Left:** The success of the American-built DUKW amphibious vehicles at Sicily ensured that they were used on D-Day and in northwest Europe as well as during the Korean War*

Images: Alamy, Getty

RACE TO MESSINA

The rivalry between Bernard Montgomery and George S Patton saw a competitive Allied campaign to complete the invasion of Sicily



Montgomery points to a map of Sicily while Patton looks on at the Royal Palace in Palermo

Patton confers with Brigadier General Theodore Roosevelt Jr, the eldest son of US President Theodore Roosevelt, July 1943

General Sir Harold Alexander, commander of Allied 15th Army Group, c.1943

***Above:** Montgomery stops his car near the front lines and talks to British sappers who are working on a Sicilian road*

Although overseen at a distance by Eisenhower, the invasion of Sicily was characterised by the rivalry between Montgomery and General George S Patton. Both veterans of the First World War, Montgomery and Patton saw heavy combat and were wounded during that conflict. These experiences had a significant impact on how they conducted warfare in their later careers.

During the Second World War, Montgomery refused to accept high casualty rates on the scale of 1914-18 and was famous for his caution and meticulous planning. He stubbornly refused to attack unless he felt it was necessary but his methodical tactics enabled him to halt and push back the Afrika Korps in North Africa.

Like Montgomery, Patton also wanted to avoid high casualties but he believed this would be achieved through relentless advances using armoured vehicles. This approach bore fruit in North Africa during the Tunisian Campaign, with Patton famously saying: "My motto in battle is go forward!"

Alexander in command

Montgomery and Patton's military approaches were therefore very different – one general advocated for slow advances while the other believed in speed. Nevertheless, the pair had to work together in Sicily.

For the invasion, Montgomery commanded the British Eighth Army while Patton led the US Seventh Army. Both came under the umbrella of 15th Army Group – an Allied formation led by Alexander. Like Montgomery and Patton, Alexander had fought in the First World War where he was decorated for his bravery. He was famous for his modest charm and was Churchill's favourite British commander.

One of Alexander's talents was diplomacy. Using tact and charm, he formed excellent relationships with Allied commanders (including Montgomery and Patton) to form military cohesiveness. However, this diplomacy also meant that he did not have a strong grip on his armies. This was necessary to negotiate between competing Allied political demands but it allowed ambitious commanders to operate more independently.

"MONTGOMERY REFUSED TO ACCEPT HIGH CASUALTY RATES ON THE SCALE OF WWI AND HE WAS FAMOUS FOR HIS CAUTION AND METICULOUS PLANNING"

The successful landings of 10 July 1943 enabled Montgomery to land in Sicily the following day. He confidently (if somewhat dismissively) wrote to Alexander: "Everything going well here… No need for you to come unless you wish." Patton, who also landed on 11 July, even ignored Alexander's orders and began to advance into Sicily's interior rather than mop up local Axis resistance.

Montgomery aimed to capture the strategic port of Messina in northeast Sicily. This would cut off Axis forces from the Italian mainland but the surrounding terrain was difficult. The Eighth Army would directly advance to Messina from the south with Montgomery wanting Patton to move north in parallel with the British.

It was now that inter-Allied tension reared its head. The most suitable road to Messina was Route 124, which Alexander gave to Montgomery. Patton was not pleased with a decision that appeared to favour Montgomery and bitterly wrote in his diary" "[Alexander and his staff] gave us the future plan of operations, which cuts us (the Americans) off from any possibility of taking Messina. It is noteworthy that Alexander, the Allied commander of a British and American Army, had no Americans with him. What fools we are."

'A jolly good race'

Patton did not want the Seventh Army to merely support the Eighth Army's left flank towards Messina. He persuaded Alexander to split the American forces in two to capture both western Sicily and the northern coastal town of Termini. Alexander agreed provided that the Americans continued to protect Montgomery's left flank. However, Patton ignored this request and raced the western part of his army towards Sicily's capital, Palermo. He then used the other force to turn east from Termini and began to race Montgomery to Messina.

Instead of interconnected cooperation, Patton and Montgomery now fought separate battles on Sicily. This rivalry had strategic implications but it was also petty. After Palermo was captured, Patton and Montgomery met on several occasions. At one point Patton complained about Montgomery not providing lunch, and when the pair met again he sent his aide rather than appearing himself to meet his British counterpart.

Montgomery, although keen to reach Messina first, remained cautious and preferred to reduce casualties where possible despite heavy fighting around Mount Etna. Meanwhile, Patton launched a series of small amphibious assaults and ordered Lieutenant General Omar Bradley's II Corps to prioritise speed. As the Seventh Army advanced east along Sicily's northern coast, they continued to encounter dogged enemy resistance. Nevertheless, Patton's persistence paid off and the Seventh Army entered Messina on 17 August 1943 with the British 4th Armoured Brigade arriving just 30 minutes later. Brigadier JC Currie saluted Patton, saying: "General, it was a jolly good race. I congratulate you."

This race to Messina, although rooted in the ambitions of Montgomery and Patton, did decide the outcome of the invasion. Montgomery's strategy worked and probably reduced Eighth Army casualties, while Patton restored American military prestige that had been dented in North Africa. Despite their personal rivalry, Montgomery admired Patton's soldiers: "[They] are quite first class and I have a very great admiration for the way they fight."

Images: Alamy, Getty

SAS IN SICILY

WORDS **GAVIN MORTIMER**

How the elite unit emerged from chaotic beginnings to spearhead the Allies' 1943 invasion of the Mediterranean island fortress

Lieutenant John Wiseman of One Troop (far right) was awarded the Military Cross for his actions at Capo Murro di Porco in Sicily

On 28 January 1943 a message was sent to Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, commander of the Afrika Korps in North Africa. It was a short, handwritten note and it contained two glaring mistakes. It was Lieutenant Colonel Stirling who had been captured, not 'Stierling', as the message indicated, and he did not lead the Long Range Desert Group.

David Stirling had raised L Detachment, Special Air Service in the summer of 1941, with the help of his elder brother, Bill, when the pair had been stationed in Cairo. The inaugural raid, Operation Squatter, on the night of 16/17 November 1941 had been a costly failure, with 34 of the 55 men who had parachuted into Libya to attack enemy airfields killed or captured.

But the SAS had flourished since then, thanks in no small part to the instinctive pugnacity of Paddy Mayne, one of the original six officers recruited in August 1941. In December that year he had led two daring raids on Tamet airfield, destroying 51 aircraft and killing a significant number of aircrew.

David Stirling and Mayne didn't much care for each other, but they complemented one another well. The latter, an international rugby forward before the war, was a physical force of nature with courage, self-control and, most crucially, a brain that reacted a split second faster than his enemy's. In contrast, Stirling was not an athlete and while he had Mayne's physical courage he lacked his alacrity and audacity. But Stirling had imagination, social contacts and a charm that to many was irresistible. It was this last quality that had enabled the SAS to overcome its early setback and rise from a small unit of 66 officers and men to, in September 1942, a regiment.

In the space of 12 months Stirling had risen from lieutenant to lieutenant colonel, and recipient of the Distinguished Service Order. Mayne was a major with a similar decoration but considered Stirling's superior in the art of guerrilla warfare.

"STIRLING WAS GOING INTO AN AREA WHERE THE NATIVES WERE KNOWN TO BE HOSTILE AND THAT HE WOULD BE CAPTURED, I SUGGESTED HE SHOULD TAKE A WIDER SWEEP. HOWEVER, HE WAS OBSTINATE AS USUAL AND THEY GOT HIM"

It was rivalry that spurred Stirling to embark on his final, fateful patrol in January 1943. His plan was to lead a small raiding party from Libya into Tunisia, attacking enemy lines of communication as well as reconnoitring the terrain for the Eighth Army. Then they would drive north through Tunisia to become the first members of the Eighth Army to link with the British First Army as it advanced east from Algeria.

But Stirling's desire to get one over Mayne had clouded his judgement, making him incautious instead of audacious. "He told me of the route he was going to take, close round the flank of the Mareth Line," said Brigadier George Davy, director of military operations in Cairo. "I said he was going into an area where the natives were known to be hostile and that he would be captured, I suggested he should take a wider sweep. However, he was obstinate as usual and they got him."

Stirling and his patrol were caught on 24 January, although it took three weeks before the news filtered back to the SAS base at Kabrit, 80 miles (130km) east of Cairo. The entry in the regiment's war diary on 14 February noted: "Lt-Col A.D Stirling, D.S.O (Scots Guards), the Commanding Officer of this unit, was officially reported as missing, believed prisoner of war. Major Mayne returned from Syria."

Mayne had left for the British army's Ski School in the Lebanon (the French Mandate of Syria included present-day Lebanon) on 24 January, the day that Stirling was captured, along with six officers and 77 other ranks from A Squadron.

They had returned from raiding in Libya in early January and had been posted to the Ski School to prepare for operations in the Balkans. But those plans were now up

***Below:** After playing a vital role in the successful assault on Sicily, the SAS landed at Bagnara on the Italian mainland in September*

***Right, top:** SAS troops came ashore at this beach (pictured in 2022) in Bagnara as Allied forces looked to drive Axis forces out of Italy*

***Right, bottom:** All that remains of the gun battery at Capo Murro di Porco in Sicily which was destroyed by SAS forces in an amphibious assault*

in the air. Stirling had been an unorthodox CO, one who didn't believe in structure or administration. Consequently, reflected SAS officer John Lodwick, his capture threw the SAS into "chaos". He explained: "A great and powerful organisation had been built up, but it had been an organisation controlled and directed by a single man. Stirling alone knew where everybody was, what they were doing and what he subsequently intended them to do."

The future of the SAS was in peril. Who could possibly replace David Stirling? Mayne's name must have been mentioned but was he considered too raw? Or did his reputation for rowdiness when drunk work against him? Probably the former. Also overlooked as a replacement was Major Earl George Jellicoe, officially Stirling's deputy, who had spent the winter in London attending a series of conferences at Combined Operations HQ (COHQ) about the future direction of special forces after the conclusion of the Desert War.

Chairing many of the conferences was David Stirling's big brother, Bill, now a lieutenant colonel, who had been appointed commanding officer of No62 Commando in October 1942. At the Casablanca Conference in January 1943, it had been agreed that No62 Commando would be posted to Algiers to commence operations in the Western Mediterranean (No62 Commando became the Second SAS Regiment in May 1943). Bill was in Algiers when he learned of David's capture so Combined Operations HQ instructed him to fly to Kabrit, assess the state of the SAS and make a recommendation.

Bill Stirling sent his report to Brigadier Bob Laycock at COHQ on 28 February. "There is no doubt that all SAS activities for the Mediterranean should be under one hand," he wrote. "I do not think it matters in the least who commands SAS so long as it is someone who… controls small raiding activities so far as personnel is concerned over the whole Mediterranean basin."

The man chosen by COHQ was Lieutenant Colonel Harry Cator, a 46-year-old decorated veteran of the First World War, who in 1940 had volunteered to command a new unit called the Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps, which subsequently became No51 Commando. Cator was chosen because he was an adroit man-manager, an experienced officer with the patience and tact required to deal with obstructive staff officers and obstreperous junior officers. His full title was commanding officer, Raiding Forces, and his command included 1SAS Regiment, a Greek Squadron, Raiding Forces Signals and a Light Repair Section.

"ALTHOUGH PADDY MAYNE MUST HAVE WEIGHED CLOSE ON 17 STONE, THERE WAS NOT AN OUNCE OF SURPLUS FLESH ON HIS BODY, AND I WAS TO LEARN LATER THAT HIS POWERS OF ENDURANCE WERE UNLIMITED"

On 19 March the SAS war diary stated that the regiment had been "reorganised". One of the four squadrons, D, had been designated the Special Boat Squadron under the command of Jellicoe, and 1SAS had been renamed the Special Raiding Squadron (SRS) with Mayne in charge. The diarist added: "Various officers and men who the new establishment is unable to cater for have been warned for other jobs or units." (The SRS reverted to 1SAS in December 1943. For clarity's sake we will refer to the SRS throughout as the SAS)

Mayne was ruthless in getting rid of soldiers he didn't believe possessed the physical and mental qualities required for irregular warfare. A number were upper-class officers who had been recruited by David Stirling the previous autumn when the SAS was granted regimental status.

One of the young officers who did survive the cull was Lieutenant Peter Davis. He had joined the SAS shortly before Christmas and not long after the war he wrote one of the most expressive depictions of Mayne…

"My first impression of Paddy was amazement at the massiveness of him," recorded Davis. "His form seemed to fill the whole tent. Standing well over six foot every part of his body was built on a proportionally generous scale… Although he must have weighed close on 17 stone, there

Augusta, a vital naval base on Sicily's east coast, was taken by the SAS after light German resistance

***Below:** The same location in Augusta, Sicily, as it looks today*

An international Irish rugby player before the war, Paddy Mayne commanded 1SAS during Operation Husky

was not an ounce of surplus flesh on his body, and I was to learn later that his powers of endurance were unlimited."

Davis first encountered Mayne in his tent in Kabrit, and was struck by the intensity of his blue eyes and the softness of his voice: "Paddy was courteous and charming, as he always was with strangers… From the very first moments one set eyes on him, Paddy Mayne gave the impression of being a great man. Not indeed because he was always showing it or talking about it, but simply from the terrific force and vitality that radiated from him… There was nothing stuck up about him; he would talk for hours to anyone whether a man, NCO or officer, on terms of absolute equality."

Cator was a discerning commander, adhering to his responsibilities and refraining from intervening as his units began training for the war in Europe. "As far as Raiding Forces Headquarters were concerned, they might just as well have not existed for all the effect they had on our training or our control," said Davis. "All decisions rested solely with Paddy."

Mayne divided his force of approximately 280 men into three troops. One Troop was under the command of Captain Bill Fraser, along with Mayne the only surviving officer of the six who had joined L Detachment in the summer of 1941.

Davis was in Two Troop, commanded by Captain Tony Marsh, as was another young officer, Lieutenant Derrick Harrison. For a month Mayne put his officers and men through a battery of tests. No one was exempt, regardless of combat experience. "We learned again how to read a map, to use a compass, and many more of the elementary things a soldier has to know," recalled Harrison. "Only when every man had passed his elementary tests was the more interesting training reached."

The men stripped and reassembled British, American, German and Italian weapons; swam, ran and climbed. They were based at Azzib in Palestine (today known as Achziv), and the culmination of their physical training was a timed route march from Tiberias, on the western edge of the Sea of Galilee, to the camp at Azzib: 45 miles (72km) that had to be covered in under 24 hours. "Marches like this played an

***Below:** Two Troop, pictured here in 1943, landed in Sicily half-a-mile further west than planned but were able to complete their mission*

***Above:** The SAS suffered heavy casualties at Termoli on the Italian east coast*

***Right:** Bill Fraser and Derrick Harrison discuss plans for the coming operation*

invaluable part in fitting us for our task in Europe," reflected Harrison. "They made us fit, and they showed us what we could do when necessary."

Above all, Mayne had instilled in his men an unshakeable self-confidence, a belief that their training made them superior to other soldiers.

This faith was shared by General Miles Dempsey, commanding 13 Corps, who visited the SAS at Azzib on 13 May and was impressed by what he saw. He assembled the men in the camp cinema and informed them that they would be under his command for the forthcoming invasion of Europe. The objective of the SAS, explained Dempsey, was to neutralise a coastal defence battery. He didn't reveal its location but he did tell the SAS: "I know I need not impress on you the importance of succeeding in this task. I am confident you will succeed."

The SAS spent most of June in the Gulf of Aqaba, in the northern tip of the Red Sea, practising amphibious landings from Landing Craft Assault (LCA) boats and scaling cliffs to take out the imaginary battery on top.

Rehearsal became reality on the night of 10 July when the SAS landed at Capo Murro di Porco, a peninsula on the south-east coast of Sicily that in English translated as Cape of the Pig's Snout.

For the majority of the SAS this was a new type of warfare; the old hands in the desert had operated as small teams of guerrillas, and the newer recruits had come from regular infantry regiments. Mayne was one of the few soldiers who had experience of amphibious assaults, having fought the Vichy French in Syria at Battle of Litani River with No11 Scottish Commando in June 1941.

One of Mayne's officers, Lieutenant John Wiseman, had also fought in Syria, taking part in one of the last British cavalry charges while serving with the North Somerset Yeomanry. Now, almost exactly two years later, his transport was an assault craft instead of a horse. Wiseman's One Troop was tasked with a frontal attack on the battery and garrison huts. "We landed, got up the cliff and the area where the gun had barbed wire round it. I got there first and we cut the wire," recalled Wiseman. "I thought it might be mined but it wasn't so we went through a gap I'd cut in the wire."

As he cut the wire, the SAS mortar platoon rained down bombs on the huts and the battery. Wiseman and his men waited until the salvo was over. What then occurred earned Wiseman a Military Cross, the citation for which stated: "Immediately the mortar fire finished he went straight in, achieving complete surprise, killing, capturing and wounding 40 of the enemy… Although the darkness of the night made control difficult, he maintained complete command, and the information which he sent back was invaluable to the proper conduct of the operation."

Two Troop's objective was to attack the battery from the rear but they had been landed half-a-mile further west than planned. Now they were in danger of getting in the way of One Troop. Davis' section arrived at some barbed wire just as Wiseman and his men were cutting a gap. He ordered his men into defensive positions as Wiseman's section advanced. "The mortar fire had now ceased, and soon, mingled with the whine of the bullets, we heard the occasional burst of Mills grenade, and a faint shouting of English voices," recalled Davis. "Slowly the hubbub died down, and now we could see figures walking among the enemy positions, firing an occasional burst from a Tommy Gun or throwing the odd grenade into the darker corners."

Lieutenant Derrick Harrison of Two Troop had with him the three-man Engineer section, led by Sergeant Bill Deakins, whose job was to destroy the captured battery. The guns were of a First World War vintage, manufactured in Britain. "We opened the breech and put a charge across the hinges," said Deakins. "It was a five-second charge which gave us just enough time to sprint for cover."

The ground shook as the guns exploded. Job done. "I went up to Paddy, saluted and said: 'Guns out of action, Sir,'" remembered Deakins. At 0520 hours, Mayne fired a Verey light, the signal to the invasion fleet that the coastal battery had been eliminated.

Mayne had established his command post in a nearby farm, which had been the objective of Three Troop, and Davis described their commanding officer "looking calm and pleased". With good reason – they had achieved their objective without losing a man.

But their satisfaction did not last long. As Davis and his men dozed in the early morning Sun "we were roused by a sharp explosion from inland, which interrupted our peaceful reverie in the rudest way". Out at sea fountains of water

"HE WENT STRAIGHT IN, ACHIEVING COMPLETE SURPRISE, KILLING, CAPTURING AND WOUNDING 40 OF THE ENEMY... ALTHOUGH THE DARKNESS OF THE NIGHT MADE CONTROL DIFFICULT, HE MAINTAINED COMPLETE COMMAND"

erupted close to the main Allied invasion fleet. "At once we realised that another coastal battery, a mile or two inland, had started to engage our shipping," said Davis.

Mayne ordered his squadron to silence the second battery, so the men headed north-east on foot across fields and through olive groves. A section of One Troop led by Sergeant Reg Seekings, DCM, an SAS Original, spotted a white flag being waved from a pill box.

Corporal Geoff Caton, a popular desert veteran, advanced to take the surrender and was fatally shot. Outraged, Seekings stormed the pill box, and as the citation for his Military Medal described: "With grenades, and finally his revolver, killed the occupants. He then collected his sub-section and advanced on and wiped out the mortar post, thus allowing his troop to continue their advance."

The second battery was swiftly neutralised and the SAS's work on Capo Murro di Porco was done. As well as destroying two coastal gun batteries, they had killed or wounded 200 of the enemy and taken 500 prisoners. Deakins remembered that Mayne tempered his praise for his men with one admonishment – they had been profligate with their ammunition and "if the squadron used as much ammunition in future operations, we would be sent to shore with five rounds apiece".

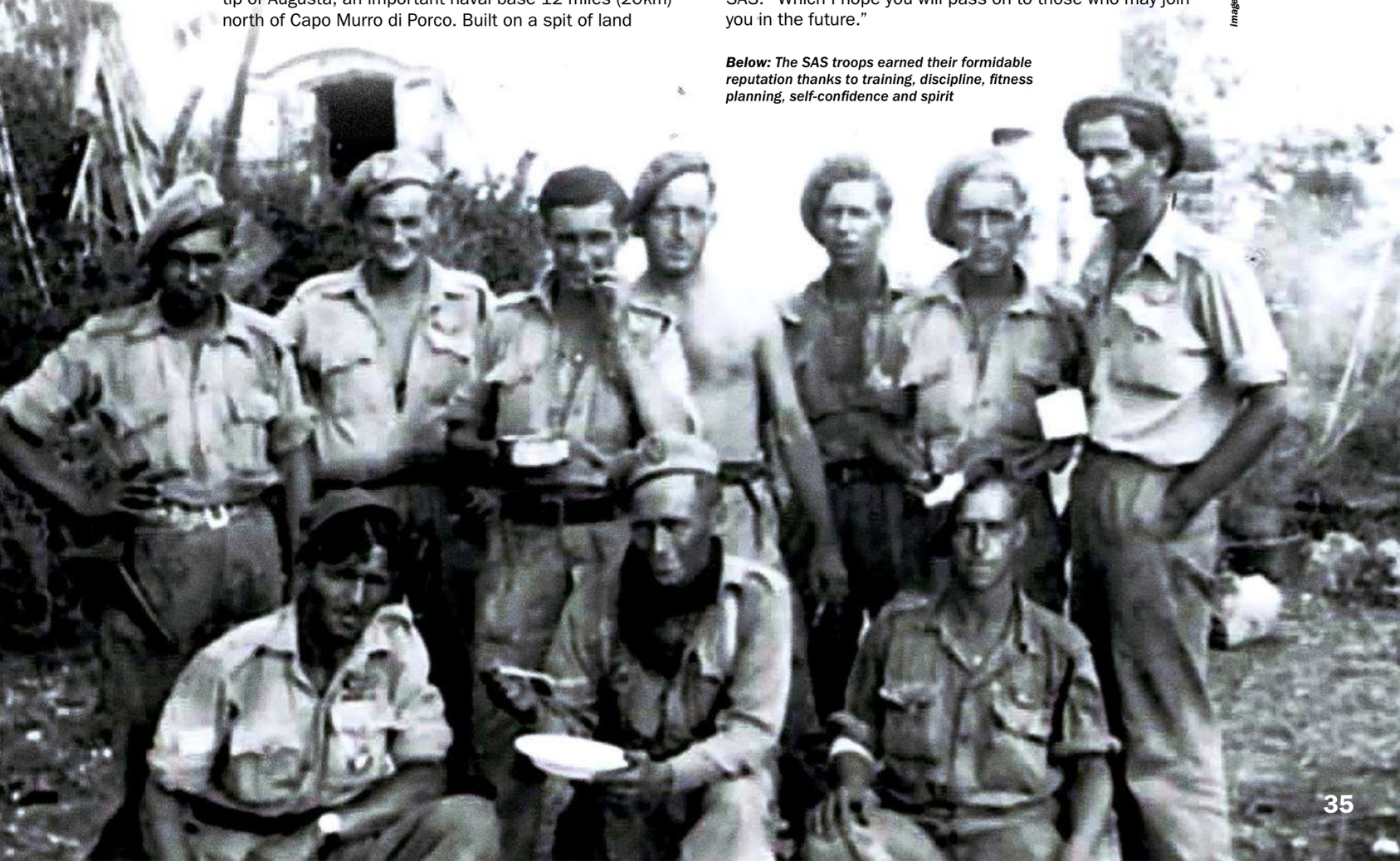
The SAS didn't have long to wait for their next operation. In the early evening of 12 July they landed on the southern tip of Augusta, an important naval base 12 miles (20km) north of Capo Murro di Porco. Built on a spit of land attached to the mainland by a bridge, the centrepiece of Augusta was a 13th century castle with walls that were 8ft (2.5m) thick. Intelligence reports stated that a white flag had been seen from the citadel and the SAS were ordered to land and investigate the veracity of this.

They knew the reports to be untrue even before they had set foot in Augusta. "We could hear rounds thudding into the landing craft and the whoosh of shells exploding in the water all around," said Lance Corporal Albert Youngman of Three Troop as the LCAs approached the port. The ramps came down and the SAS poured out, scrambling over large slippery boulders. Two medics, John Bentley and George Shaw, were killed and several men were wounded as the SAS fought their way inshore.

The German resistance was light, however, and they withdrew overnight to leave the SAS in possession of Augusta before 17 Brigade arrived to take control.

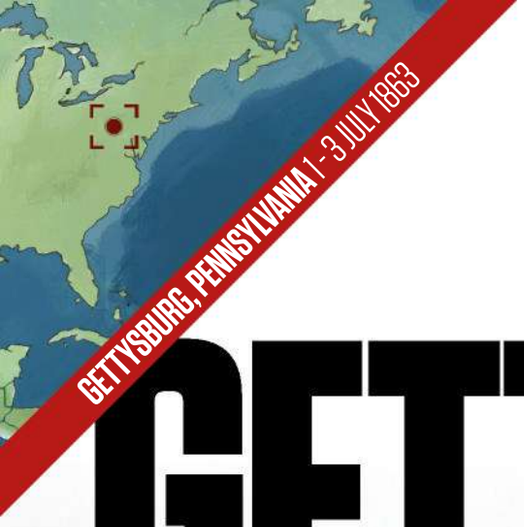
On 20 August the SAS war diary recorded that Mayne had been awarded a bar to the Distinguished Service Order he'd received in North Africa. The citation stated: "In both these operations it was Major Mayne's courage, determination and superb leadership which proved the key to success. He personally led his men from the landing craft in the face of heavy machine gun fire and mortar fire in the case of the Augusta raid."

Mayne would later lead his men into Italy, landing at Bagnara in September and Termoli the following month, where a third of their force was either killed, wounded or captured. Four days after the Battle of Termoli, the SAS was inspected by Dempsey. He regretted that they would soon be returning to Britain and no longer under his command. "In all my military career – and in my time I have commanded many units – I have never yet a met a unit in which I had such confidence as I have in yours," Dempsey told them. "And I mean that." The general listed his six reasons for their success: training, discipline, fitness, planning and self-confidence. The sixth was perhaps the most important. "Last of all, you have the right spirit," Dempsey told the SAS. "Which I hope you will pass on to those who may join you in the future."



***Below:** The SAS troops earned their formidable reputation thanks to training, discipline, fitness planning, self-confidence and spirit*

Images Getty, Gavin Mortimer, Wiki / PD / Gov



GETTYSBURG, PENNSYLVANIA 1 - 3 JULY 1863

GETTYSBURG

The embattled Union forces finally succeed in repulsing the second invasion of the northern states by Robert E Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, in the turning point of the US Civil War

WORDS IAIN MACGREGOR

One of the most iconic photographs of the battlefield, 'The Harvest of Death' by Timothy O'Sullivan pictures Union dead in the field

By the beginning of the summer of 1863, the American Civil War in the eastern theatre of Northern Virginia was on a knife edge. Defeat after defeat for the Union forces had driven President Abraham Lincoln to despair and to hire and fire his way through several commanders. The grand plans of Lincoln's supposedly finest field commander of 1862, General George B McClellan, to take the vast army he had painstakingly rebuilt to occupy the enemy's capital of Richmond and so bring to battle and smash Confederate forces, had failed. What followed was a series of even bloodier failures and lost opportunities. The failure of McClellan to catch Lee's divided forces at Antietam was followed by his successor Ambrose Burnside's tactics of massed assaults which led to the carnage at Fredericksburg.

Replacing Burnside with Joseph Hooker had now led to the calamity of an even bigger defeat and loss of life at Chancellorsville. The Battle of Chancellorsville in May had been another disaster for the north, as once again, thousands of Federal troops were badly led and needlessly killed or wounded as a smaller Confederate army ran circles around them in the dense woods of the Wilderness and inflicted a stunning defeat. Though ingenious in its conception, and dramatic in victory over the enemy, the Army of the Potomac was not destroyed. Robert E Lee's forces were still too weak to inflict that kind of damage. And Lee's victory had come at a cost – among the loss of valuable troops, the Army of Northern Virginia lost arguably its most talented and aggressive corps commander: Joseph 'Stonewall' Jackson. Lee would be proven correct when he surmised Jackson's loss as akin to losing his own right arm.

While Lee restructured his army and chain of command, so the Army of the Potomac licked its wounds once more, as it hunkered down around its entrenched positions outside of Fredericksburg, unaware of Lee's intentions but still with the hapless Hooker in command. The Union commander's days were numbered, however, with an exasperated Lincoln seeing his commander out-generalled by Lee and now as the Confederates marched north, with Hooker seeking excuses not to engage them, Lincoln fired him.

In his place, marching his own V Corps in Hooker's army after Lee, was Major General George G Meade. Wary of the challenge and what had befallen his predecessors, Meade wrote to his wife that command of the army was "more likely to destroy one's reputation than add to it". What Meade had was the loyalty of his immediate corps commanders who had all recommended that he be given the position and, just as importantly, he had a cadre of talented junior officers who would prove their worth once his army was again locked in combat with the enemy from Northern Virginia.

OPPOSING FORCES

UNION STATES		CONFEDERATE STATES
COMMANDER		COMMANDER
George Meade		Robert E Lee
INFANTRY		INFANTRY
c.100,000		c.75,000
ARTILLERY		ARTILLERY
360		270
CAVALRY		CAVALRY
36 regiments		9,500

"THE ARMY OF THE POTOMAC LICKED ITS WOUNDS ONCE MORE"

***Top:** A dead Confederate sharpshooter in Devil's Den during the Battle of Gettysburg*

***Above:** Headquarters of General George Meade on Cemetery Ridge*

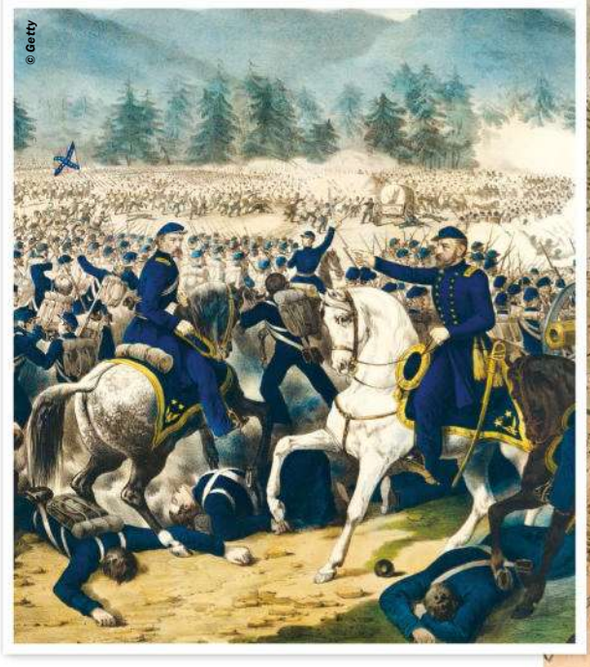
Images: Getty, Wiki / PD / Gov

Background

Fought in and around the hills of the quiet Pennsylvanian town, across three pivotal days in the high summer of 1863 (though there were battles just as bloody, if not more so than Gettysburg) this victory for the Union was arguably the key battle of the entire Civil War. Fresh from their stunning victory over a demoralised and badly led Union Army at Chancellorsville that May, the jubilant Army of Northern Virginia, led by their legendary commander Lee, now attempted an even more audacious campaign. Supported by the Confederate political leadership, Lee's army was tasked to take the initiative and break the Union Army on its own territory and force a diplomatic solution to the war.

Though gaining a spectacular victory at Chancellorsville, it had come at a great cost to the South, both in men, materiel, and leadership, which would have dire consequences later that fateful summer. The Army of Northern Virginia had been hastily reorganised by Lee after the death of his brilliant corps commander Jackson. He now remoulded his army into three corps under the respective commands of Lieutenant Generals James Longstreet (First), Richard S Ewell (Second), and AP Hill (Third). Further reinforced with the four cavalry brigades led by the charismatic horseman JEB Stuart, the Confederate forces assembled to invade the north would total 72,000 men. Lee was confident in the fighting ability of his men, in his command structure and in his own experience to read the minds of whichever Union commander Lincoln placed in front of him. In short, Lee believed in the success of his mission, perhaps too confidently, as would be seen at Gettysburg.

The Army of the Potomac had been badly led by Hooker at Chancellorsville and given a sound beating. While Washington agonised over whether to retain Hooker's services or



A lithograph print produced shortly after the battle depicts General Mead, with the Confederate army fleeing

© Getty

01 A BLIND ARMY

Lee is robbed of intelligence on the enemy when the eyes of his army, JEB Stuart's three cavalry brigades, take off on a raid miles ahead of the Confederate columns on 25 June. It leaves Lee unaware of where his enemy is or what strength his forces might be up against.

02 A NEW UNION COMMANDER

The Army of the Potomac's disastrous performance at Chancellorsville was down to their inept commander Major General Joseph Hooker. His failure to engage Lee's army as it marched north into Pennsylvania forces President Lincoln to replace him with Major General George Meade.

03 THE UNION DEFENDS THE HEIGHTS

Lee's forces arrive at Gettysburg in larger numbers than the Union forces defending the town and drive them into the surrounding hills. With Meade still to arrive, his corps commanders take the initiative, restore order and defend a vital position.

04 DEFEND OR ATTACK?

During the battle, Lee discusses his strategy with Major General James Longstreet, commander of I Corps. Longstreet is convinced the path to victory lies in setting up defensive works between the Union forces and Washington, forcing them to attack impregnable Confederate positions. Lee disagrees and wants to defeat Meade where he stands, on the heights above them. Day Two sees this strategy ultimately fail.

11 A LOST OPPORTUNITY

Having inflicted such a bloody defeat on the enemy, President Lincoln is dismayed to learn that Meade has allowed Lee's forces to retreat towards Virginia unmolested for at least 24 hours. But in reality the Army of the Potomac is equally exhausted.

10 PICKETT'S CHARGE

At 2pm, Longstreet orders Major General George Pickett to lead nine Confederate brigades in a direct assault on the centre of Meade's lines. It's a disaster. Marching across a mile of open terrain, swept by cannon and rifle fire, Pickett's attack suffers over 50 percent casualties. The battle is over.

09 HUGE ARTILLERY BOMBARDMENT

As a prelude to the main Confederate assault on Day Three, Lee orders a powerful barrage along the intended line of attack on the Union centre. But the Confederate artillery command is uncoordinated and, in some cases, the artillery use defective shells. The Union positions remain intact.

08 JEB STEWART RETURNS

Towards the evening of Day Two Lee's cavalry commander JEB Stuart returns to headquarters with over 200 captured enemy wagons and horses. A furious Lee makes clear to his young officer that his failure to provide scouting reports has weakened their position.

07 TIMETABLE ISSUES

Getting huge formations in position to attack the Union flanks is a headache for Longstreet and gives Meade time to assess and reinforce. Day Two sees multiple occasions when too few Confederate units advance to take reinforced positions, requiring greater numbers such as the assaults on Cemetery Ridge, Devil's Den and the Peach Orchard. Confederate opportunities are wasted by poor coordination between commanders.

06 HOLDING LITTLE ROUND TOP

The belief that the tip of the Union left flank is 'hanging in the air' is primarily caused by Lee's lack of cavalry reconnaissance. He believes he can take what he thinks is a lightly defended position and collapse the Union line. What follows is a heroic defence by Meade's reinforcements.

05 THE GAP IN THE LINE

A strong defensive position for Meade is weakened on Day Two by Major General Daniel E Sickles who, keen to move to higher ground ahead of him, orders III Corps to march from their positions along Cemetery Ridge to occupy it. It exposes his flanks and leaves a gap in the line. Lee's offensive hammers the salient Sickles now occupies without support. The day is saved by Meade rushing in over 20,000 reinforcements.

CONFEDERATE
- June 3rd-9th
- June 10th-16th
- June 17th-24th
- June 25th-26th
- June 27th-July 1st

UNION
- June 3rd-9th
- June 10th-16th
- June 17th-24th
- June 25th-26th
- June 27th-July 1st

- A Brandy Station, June 9th
- B Second Winchester, June 13-15th
- C Stephenson's Depot, June 15th
- D Upperville, Middlebur & Aldie June 15-17th
- E Westmister, June 28th
- F Habover, June 30th
- G Carlisle, July 1st
- H Gettysburg, July 1st-3rd

Map illustration: Rocío Espín Piñar

replace him, Union forces monitored Lee's movements, unsure of his intentions. The Confederate invasion columns crept away from their fortifications around the Rappahannock River and began to head north towards Maryland through the Shenandoah Valley, where they would coalesce to engage the enemy in Pennsylvania. Union commanders, though unaware of Lee's ultimate plans, remained under instructions from their superiors in Washington to ensure they did not threaten the city and, where possible, defeat them.

Lee's plans were ambitious: head towards Harrisburg in northern Pennsylvania and then ideally swing eastwards towards Washington itself. There, he would set his army between the capital and the pursuing Union forces who would be under orders to fight an offensive action against Lee's defensive entrenchments. This tactic had proved successful for Lee at the Battle of Fredericksburg the previous winter. While this all seemed feasible to the Confederate commander, his immediate problem as he travelled north was that his army was marching blind. Stuart's cavalry units, normally an excellent reconnaissance resource as well as skilful in shielding prying Union eyes from Lee's troop movements, had ventured too far away from the main body. As a result, Lee was strategically blind, in enemy country and unaware of how close the Federal army men actually was to his route of march. At Gettysburg on 1 July they finally collided.

"HOW DID THESE TWO SIDES BEGIN A BATTLE THAT WAS BIGGER IN SCALE THAN WATERLOO IN 1815?"

Battle commences

Every American Civil War battle seems to have a myriad of anecdotes and legends, and Gettysburg is no different. How did these two sides begin a battle that was bigger in scale than Waterloo in 1815? Apparently it was over the need for shoes. The first day of battle had a Confederate brigade under Brigadier General Henry Heth coming in from the north in search of supplies and a warehouse of shoes Confederate scouts had been told were situated in the town. They were unaware that Union cavalry of Brigadier General John Buford had ridden in from the south, spotted the Southerners and, realising the town's strategic importance as a major crossroads, taken up defensive positions on the outskirts with the hope that reinforcements from I Corps would soon arrive under the inspired leadership of Major General John Reynolds.

© Getty

The Army of the Potomac corps were travelling north independently of one another, searching for the enemy but staying in close proximity in case of attack. Heth's brigade was as blind as the rest of the Army of Northern Virginia, with no cavalry screen or scouts to warn them of any danger. They walked straight into a firefight without any idea of the size of the force they faced, nor where the bulk of the enemy was located.

As severe fighting erupted, the Confederate divisions rapidly poured into the area, overwhelming Buford's outnumbered cavalrymen and supporting infantry from Reynolds I Corps driving them back through the town and into the surrounding hills to the south, where they quickly established a defensive perimeter. Reynolds himself showed daring leadership at a critical point to stall the Confederate assault, for which he would pay with his life. But it bought valuable time

This staged photograph by Alexander Gardner depicts a dead Confederate soldier in 'Devil's Den'

'Hancock at Gettysburg' depicts the prelude to Pickett's Charge – a key moment in the battle

***Left:** Robert E Lee was the most successful Confederate general during the Civil War*

***Above:** General Lewis Armistead leads his men during the ill-fated Pickett's Charge on 3 July*

***Right:** George Mead was criticised for not closely pursuing the defeated rebel army*

for more Union reinforcements to shore up a rapidly collapsing position as the Federals gave up occupying the town and withdrew up into the hills surrounding it.

Lee had now arrived to take command and issued orders for his troops to follow up the capture of the town and advance to take the right flank of the Union line on Culp's Hill and leading to Cemetery Ridge. In both instances, Confederate commanders on the ground failed to follow through Lee's orders, in some cases because their men were exhausted from the first day's fighting. As a result, both attempts to seize key positions on the high ground, while the enemy was still forming up a defensive line, failed. It was a major opportunity missed, in part due to the initiative displayed by key divisional and corps commanders before Meade himself arrived. Once he did arrive, he agreed with their decision that their defensive position dictated they should stand and fight, issuing an official order that failure to follow orders that led to retreat would result in "instant death". More troops on both sides poured in as fighting died down for the day. Over 15,000 men had been killed, wounded or captured.

By the beginning of the second day of the battle, the Union lines above Gettysburg now resembled what would later be seen as a fishhook, situated on very good high ground with excellent views of what the enemy was doing, as well as strong internal lines of communication. Meade and his

corps commanders knew that if any point of their lines were broken, then their ability to rush in reinforcements was vital. The enemy would be coming at them along a wider front, further away from their own lines of supply and, more importantly, forced to fight uphill. Nevertheless, Lee was determined to capitalise on his army's successes the day before against an enemy he believed he could defeat, an enemy led by a commander he was convinced would be cautious.

Lee's plan was to drive Meade's army off the heights with all-out assaults on both flanks, made famous by their names: Culp's Hill and Cemetery Hill on the Union right; the Wheatfield, Devil's Den, the Peach Orchard and Little Round Top on the Union left. Both attacks in the afternoon of the second day were beaten off, with losses estimated at 20,000 killed, wounded or captured.

Throughout this key day, along the whole Union front, junior officers and their men fought like tigers and crucially did not buckle and retreat as they had before. There was new steel in this army led by Meade, exemplified by the heroic defence by the outnumbered 20th Maine Regiment led by Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain upon Little Round Top. Holding the end of the line to the south, Chamberlain's understrength regiment fought off a whole brigade of Confederates to prevent Lee taking the Union left flank and potentially destroying Meade's whole army.

"ALONG THE WHOLE UNION FRONT, JUNIOR OFFICERS AND THEIR MEN FOUGHT LIKE TIGERS"

On the final day of battle, despite Major General James Longstreet's objections, Lee was still confident that diversionary attacks on the flanks would enable a successful all-out assault on the centre of Meade's lines. Lee was mistakenly convinced in his own ability, and of his men. His army had made its own luck at Second Bull Run, Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville – they would now try to repeat this at Gettysburg. At 3pm, following a 150-gun artillery barrage, Major General George Pickett led 12,500 Confederates, including his own Virginia division, across a mile of open ground and into the teeth of a murderous field of Union fire. Meade's troops had deliberately withheld their own counter-battery fire to lull Lee into believing the centre of the line was ripe for attack. It ended in complete disaster with over half his command killed, wounded or captured. As the survivors staggered back to Confederate lines, a mournful Lee rode out to them, saying: "It's all my fault." His misplaced self-belief in their ability to achieve the impossible had guaranteed their doom.

Aftermath

The butcher's bill was colossal. Over 45,000 men were casualties, by far the biggest number of the war. Lee now had to lead his battered army through a biblical downpour (an apt metaphor for the savagery of the previous three days of fighting) back across the Potomac River and to the relative safety of Virginia. The Army of Northern Virginia suffered over 23,000 casualties and had lost many senior commanders it could not replace. Worse still, Lee's myth of invincibility and that of his army was no more, and for the remainder of the conflict the Confederates would be reacting to the Union's offensive moves.

Much to Lincoln's dismay, Meade ordered his exhausted troops to remain in their positions – perhaps still wary of any surprise manoeuvre Lee might make as he had done at Chancellorsville. The frustration in Washington at a chance to destroy the Army of Northern Virginia was tempered by bloodied Union troops dug in on the heights of Cemetery Ridge and Culp's Hill who had survived the battle. Elated by victory, they arguably were in no shape to chase down and destroy what was still a powerful Confederate force. A more dynamic commander than Meade may well have ended the war in the eastern theatre sooner. As it was, over 45,000 troops fell at Gettysburg – the bloodiest casualty list of the entire war – and the cause of the Confederacy was fatally wounded.

'Field Where General Reynolds Fell' by Timothy H O'Sullivan, pictures six dead Union soldiers

Images: Getty, Wiki / PD / Gov

PREPARING FOR KURSK

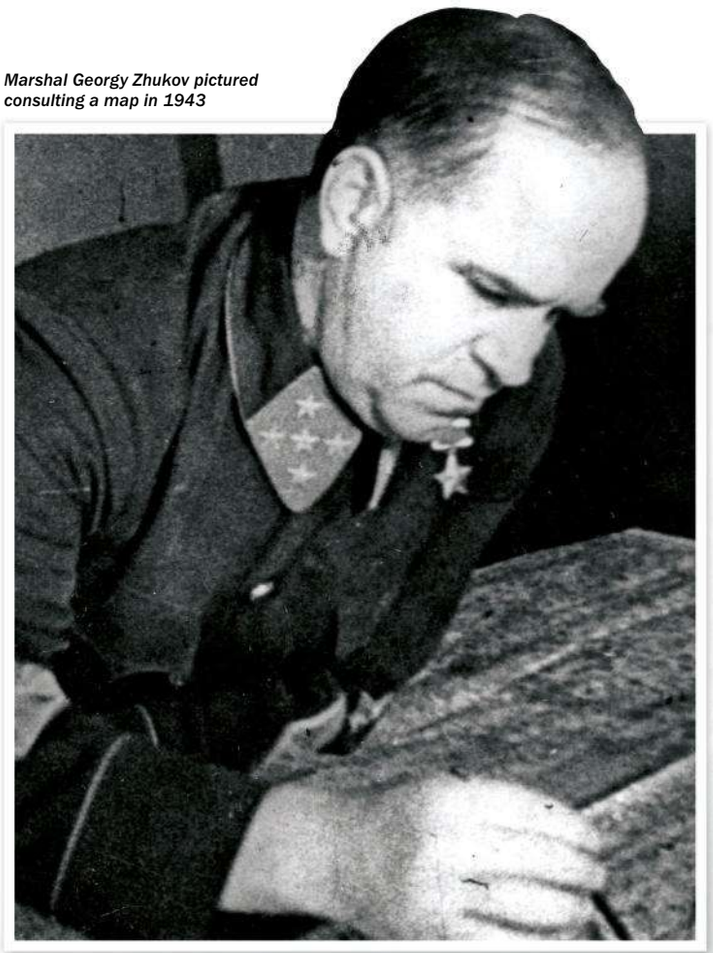
Dr Ben Wheatley of the University of East Anglia reveals the huge German and Soviet preparations for the largest tank battle in history

Fought during 5 July – 23 August 1943, the Battle of Kursk was the largest tank battle in history. Beginning with a German offensive called Operation Citadel, the battle would ultimately involve thousands of tanks and aircraft as well as millions of soldiers. Kursk became a famous Soviet victory that gave them the military initiative. From that point on, the Germans were only able to react in a limited way to Soviet advances and were never again able to launch a major offensive on the Eastern Front.

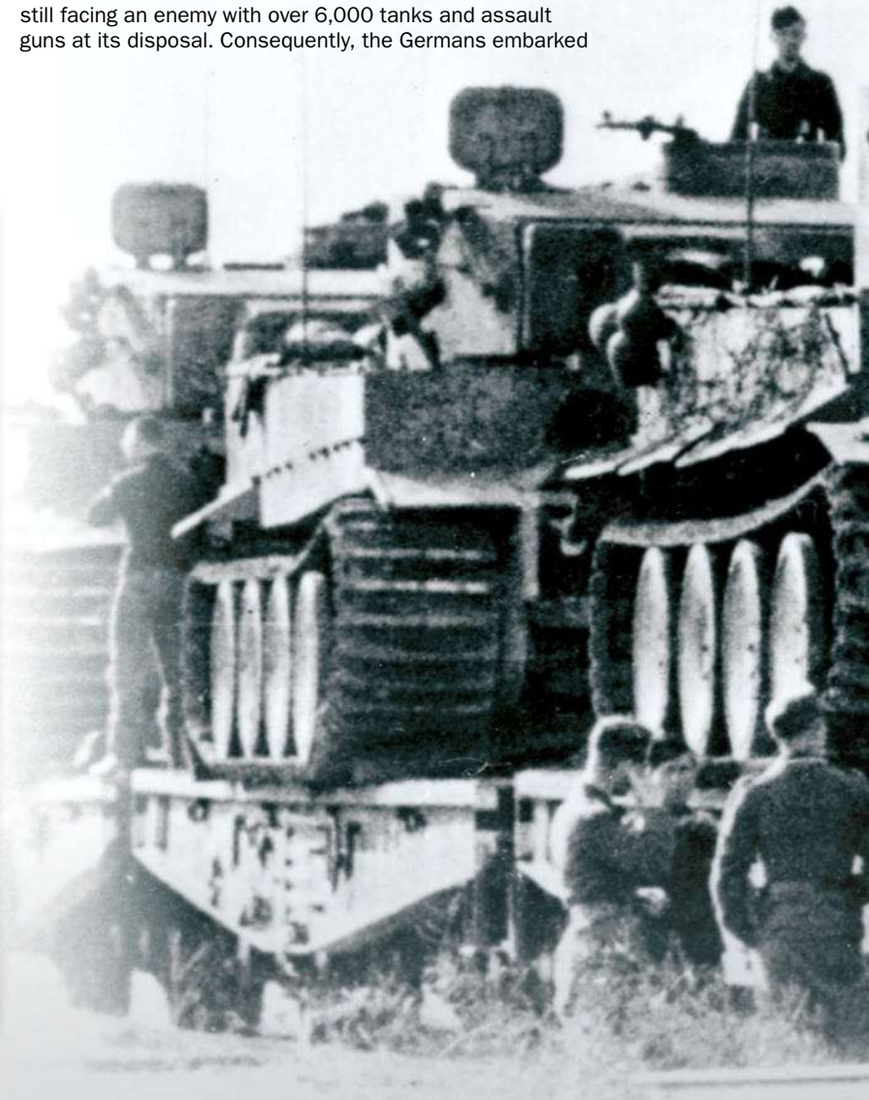
To understand why Kursk was such a large battle, it is important to understand the planning that took place beforehand. Speaking ahead of his new book *The Panzers of Prokhorovka: The Myth of Hitler's Greatest Armoured Defeat*, Dr Ben Wheatley of the University of East Anglia discusses the intense preparations in the build up to the battle. He reveals the strength and weaknesses of German and Soviet armoured forces, Hitler's personal involvement and the myth about British intelligence's role in the Soviet victory.

What conditions were the German and Soviet armoured forces in on the Eastern Front by mid-1943?

The nadir of German armoured forces on the Eastern Front was reached in April 1943 (following the monumental battles of the previous winter – Stalingrad, etc) when the Germans could only call on a paltry 612 operational tanks on the entire Eastern Front. This was from a sparse pool of 1,336 tanks. By contrast, the Germans estimated they were still facing an enemy with over 6,000 tanks and assault guns at its disposal. Consequently, the Germans embarked



Marshal Georgy Zhukov pictured consulting a map in 1943



on a major armoured rebuilding programme between April to July. However, it is often overlooked that so did the Soviets.

By early July 1943 the Soviet armoured force had once again reached staggering proportions. On the Eastern Front, the Soviets could call on 9,888 tanks and assault guns, with a further 311 facing the Finns. On the Southern-Far East Front, another 3,200 tanks and assault guns were deployed, while the Stavka (Soviet High Command) held 2,688 tanks and assault guns in reserve. This represented a monumental total of 16,087 tanks and assault guns. Facing this armoured colossus, the Germans had managed to pool 3,549 tanks and assault guns, to which the Finns could only add a further 100 tanks and assault guns.

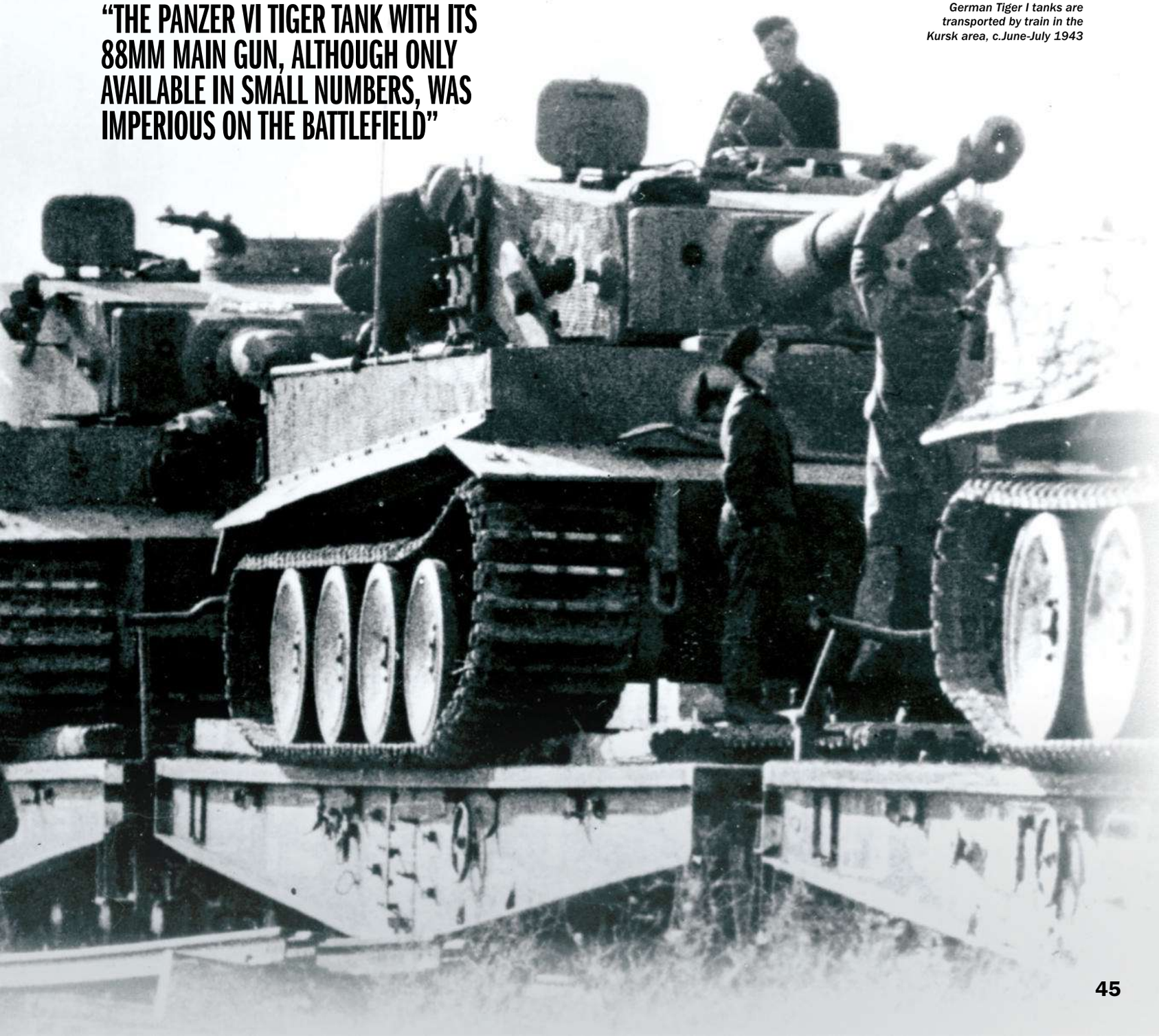
Why was Kursk and its surrounding area considered an important military objective?

Although the city of Kursk was an important centre for Soviet industry, this was largely considered irrelevant in German planning. Operation Citadel, as the German offensive against the Kursk salient would ultimately be known, had two key objectives. First, the operation was to straighten the front. By cutting off the protruding 120km-deep [75 mile] and 200km-wide [124 mile] Kursk salient (via a pincer attack at its base) a more favourable defensive line would be achieved, enabling troops to be withdrawn from the Eastern Front for the anticipated two-front war with the Western powers.

The second (and more realistic) objective was to weaken the massive Soviet forces concentrated in the Kursk area before they could launch an avalanche-like summer offensive. On 18 February 1943, Hitler had stated that he was "unable to undertake any large-scale operations this year" but "only small forays". Operation Citadel was therefore conceived by General Kurt Zeitzler, chief of the Army General Staff, within this overall defensive context. Unlike in 1941 and 1942, no German plans existed for a strategic offensive to follow. Operation Citadel constituted a preventive attack with limited aims within an overall defensive strategy.

Images: Alamy, Getty

"THE PANZER VI TIGER TANK WITH ITS 88MM MAIN GUN, ALTHOUGH ONLY AVAILABLE IN SMALL NUMBERS, WAS IMPERIOUS ON THE BATTLEFIELD"



German Tiger I tanks are transported by train in the Kursk area, c.June-July 1943

Motorised Soviet infantry make their way to the front lines, June 1943

How did German and Soviet armoured forces prepare for the battle?

Throughout the period of rebuilding between April and July 1943, both sides recognised the importance of the coming battles in the Kursk-Orel salients. Therefore, the majority of reinforcements were funnelled into this area. The Germans' northern pincer of Operation Citadel was led by Army Group Centre's 9th Army with 1,072 operational tanks, assault guns and tank destroyers. It was opposed by the Soviet Central Front's 1,607 operational tanks and assault guns.

In the 9th Army's rear Bryansk Front with 1,525 operational tanks and assault guns, and Western Front with 1,737 operational tanks and assault guns, stood ominously poised to strike against 2nd Panzer Army in the Orel salient. The 2nd Panzer Army possessed just 234 operational tanks and assault guns.

The Germans southern pincer was led by Army Group South's 4th Panzer Army and Army Detachment Kempf with a combined strength of 1,451 operational tanks, assault guns and tank destroyers. They were opposed by the Voronezh Front's 1,699 operational tanks and assault guns. A further 1,632 tanks and assault guns belonged to the Steppe Front (the Stavka strategic reserve). The German 2nd Army, with 100 operational assault guns (which saw no significant fighting in July) held the western edge of the Kursk salient.

Which tanks and armoured vehicles were available to the German and Soviet forces and which models were the most effective?

In the summer of 1943 the Red Army, despite massive superiority in tank numbers, was still reliant on the T-34 tank with its 76mm main gun. This had become inferior in firepower to the latest German Panzer IV with its 75mm long-barrelled weapon. Significantly, by July this up-gunned Panzer IV was now present in large numbers. The German assault gun (StuG) and Marder II and III tank destroyers also utilised this powerful weapon and it again appeared in large numbers, as did the by now outdated Panzer III with its 50mm long-barrelled main gun. The Panzer III, however, could still prove a threat to Red Army armour.

The Panzer VI Tiger tank with its 88mm main gun, although only available in small numbers, was imperious on the battlefield. The Germans expected new armour, such as the Ferdinand tank destroyer with its extra-long-barrelled 88mm main gun and the Panther tank, with its extra-long-barrelled 75mm main gun, to prove a success on their debut.

Alongside the T-34, the Soviets also operated lightly armoured and under-gunned T-70 tanks, while effective assault guns were beginning to enter service with the Red Army in decent numbers. The powerful new Soviet 152mm assault gun was, however, extremely rare. The Red Army also had a small number Lend-Lease Anglo-American tanks such as the Lee and Churchill.

To what extent was Adolf Hitler personally involved in planning for Kursk?

Hitler, of course, had the final say on every major planning decision. On 13 March, he issued Operations Order No5 for a pincer attack on the Kursk salient. Interestingly, on 18 April, Hitler ordered the planning of a viable alternative

In mid-1943, the T-34 was the most numerous tank in the Red Army

"VORONEZH AND CENTRAL FRONT HAD TOGETHER LAID 503,663 ANTI-TANK AND 439,348 ANTI-PERSONNEL MINES"

to Zeitzler's version of Operation Citadel. Hitler proposed a concentrated frontal attack on the Kursk salient from the 2nd Army's sector (Rylsk area) with the intention of splitting the Soviet forces in the Kursk salient. This would avoid the enemy's most strongly fortified sectors of the salient and break through at the weak point.

Zeitzler, who flew to the Berghof two days later to talk Hitler out of his "remarkable variant", wildly exaggerated the logistical difficulties that would be involved in its preparation. Zeitzler succeeded in changing Hitler's mind. Contradicting Zeitzler on 19 April, Army Group Centre's transport chief stated that the 9th Army could reach this new deployment zone in eight to ten days. Hitler also had the final say in delaying Citadel's launch. After consultations with Walter Model (9th Army's commander) and Heinz Guderian (inspector of Panzer Troops) Operation Citadel would be postponed on numerous occasions in May and June. It was finally scheduled for 5 July.

Which Soviet generals were in command for planning of Kursk and how effective were they as military leaders?

The central figures planning the Soviet strategy for the summer of 1943 – and in particular the Battle of Kursk – were Marshal Georgy Zhukov, the deputy commander in chief, Marshal Aleksandr Vasilevsky, the chief of the general staff, and of course Stalin. By 1943, all three had become extremely competent in their respective roles.

Following the Soviets' chastening defeat at Kharkov in March 1943, Stavka were wary of a further German offensive against the Kursk salient (which was the obvious target for any subsequent German offensive). However, Stalin was still in a buoyant mood following the recent victory at Stalingrad. In early April he argued that as soon as the Red Army had been sufficiently resupplied it should launch a pre-emptive strike against the Germans at Kursk.

In contrast, on 8 April Zhukov proposed to Stalin a strategic defence to absorb the coming German offensive at Kursk followed by a series of strong counter-offensives against the fatally weakened German forces. In the coming days, Central Front and Voronezh Front both backed Zhukov's proposal. Finally, on 12 April during a meeting in Moscow, Zhukov and Vasilevsky convinced Stalin of the need for an initial defensive phase to the summer strategic offensive.

What did the Soviet defensive belts in and around Kursk consist of?

The Soviets constructed eight staggered defence lines which stretched to a total depth of 300km [186 miles], including Steppe Front. Voronezh and Central Front had together laid 503,663 anti-tank and 439,348 anti-personnel mines. In the most important sectors there was a density of 1,500 anti-tank and 1,700 anti-personnel mines per kilometre.

Voronezh Front alone had installed 83,912 gun emplacements and machine-gun positions, 5,322 command and observation posts, 17,505 shelters and earth bunkers and 593km [368 miles] of wire obstacles. Similarly, huge defences existed in Central Front's sector. At the point of main effort the concentration of artillery was 124 guns per kilometre.

***Below:** Walter Model (left), commander of German 9th Army, pictured with Heinz Guderian*

Images: Alamy, Getty

Soviet tanks deploy to resist a counterattack, 2 June 1943

The Germans faced a maze of ditches, tank-traps, wire obstacles, anti-tank fronts, minefields, blocking positions, flamethrower barriers and strongpoints with built-in guns. The enemy had to pass through a firewall of artillery, behind which masses of Soviet tanks awaited them.

The Battle of Kursk is famous for its extensive use of tanks but how important were aircraft and infantry?
Absolutely vital. For example, the Germans would pay dearly for their relative lack of infantry during the Citadel offensive. The Panzer divisions were often tasked with undertaking roles which should have been allocated to infantry divisions, such as flank protection. The Soviets' trump card was their mammoth amount of artillery. For Operation Citadel, Model's 9th Army possessed 223,000 troops, 3,630 barrelled weapons and 640 aircraft, while their direct opponents – Central Front – could call on 510,983 troops, 12,453 barrelled weapons and 1,034 aircraft.

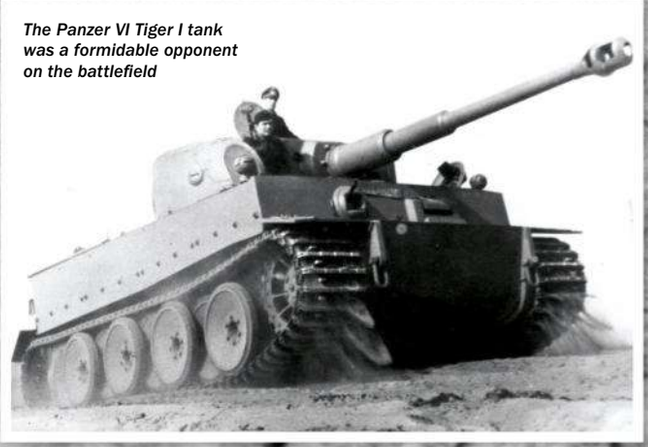
Model was distracted by the presence of vast formations to his rear facing the Orel salient and Bryansk Front with 335,068 troops, 10,199 barrelled weapons, 995 aircraft and Western Front with 226,043 troops, 5,802 barrelled weapons and 1,322 aircraft. Against this vast force, 2nd Panzer Army could only offer 107,000 troops and 2,050 barrelled weapons.

Army Group South's 4th Panzer Army and Army Detachment Kempf had a combined strength of 215,271 troops, 2,847 barrelled weapons and 732 aircraft. Their opponent – Voronezh Front – possessed 466,236 troops, 9,751 barrelled weapons and 881 aircraft. In addition, Steppe Front stood ready to deploy 449,133 troops, 9,211 barrelled weapons and 1,205 aircraft. As stated, the German 2nd Army with 80,000 troops and 940 barrelled weapons held the western edge of the Kursk salient.

What role did British intelligence play in assisting the Soviets before the battle? If so, how important was its contribution?
The importance of officially passed Ultra intelligence (the name given to decoded signal intelligence) is often over-hyped in the West. The Soviets were fully aware of the Germans' offensive intentions against the Kursk salient via their own sources of intelligence. This included air reconnaissance, signals interception and foreign agents long before they received official notification from British Ultra intelligence of the obvious German build up.

At the end of April, Ultra picked up a comprehensive assessment by Army Group South of future German intentions at Kursk – which was passed to the Soviets on 30 April along with a warning that the attack would take place in the near future. For next two months, however, Ultra intelligence assessments were doubtful regarding future combat at Kursk (no doubt reflecting the Germans' own misgivings). Ultra often gave contradictory information

A German Marder III tank destroyer pictured in action against Soviet tanks, c.1942-43



The Panzer VI Tiger I tank was a formidable opponent on the battlefield

which limited its operational use. Ultra did not indicate the German offensive had begun until 10 July, which was the sixth day of the offensive. In other words, Ultra offered no advance warning.

Is there a counter-narrative possibility that Germany could have won the battle?

The simple answer is no. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, there are questions as to how committed Model was to the offensive. His decision not to place his armour in the vanguard perhaps points to this. There is a definite sense that Model was protecting his armour for more important battles to come (such as the defence of the Orel salient). Model was also dissatisfied with the number of troop reinforcements 9th Army received, while he was very concerned that aerial reconnaissance had revealed the vast depth of Soviet defences. Further, by launching the offensive in July, the Germans had long since lost any element of surprise.

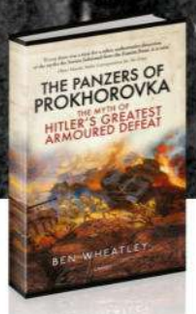
Conversely, had the offensive commenced as originally planned in April then it would have been launched during the notorious Rasputitsa (muddy season). It would have also been impossible to rehabilitate the German divisions by this date; 4th Panzer Army declared that the army would "not be operational before the beginning to middle of May".

Fundamentally though, the Germans simply faced a vastly more powerful enemy. For Citadel, the Germans could call on 518,271 combat troops, 2,623 tanks, assault guns and tank destroyers, 7,417 barrelled weapons and 1,372 aircraft. However, they would face 1,426,352 Soviet combat troops, 4,938 tanks and assault guns, 31,415 barrelled weapons and 3,648 aircraft.

Images: Alamy, Getty

German forces pictured moving on the Kursk salient

"THE ENEMY HAD TO PASS THROUGH A FIREWALL OF ARTILLERY, BEHIND WHICH MASSES OF SOVIET TANKS AWAITED THEM"



Dr Ben Wheatley is the author of *The Panzers of Prokhorovka*, which is published by Osprey Publishing and released on 8 June 2023.

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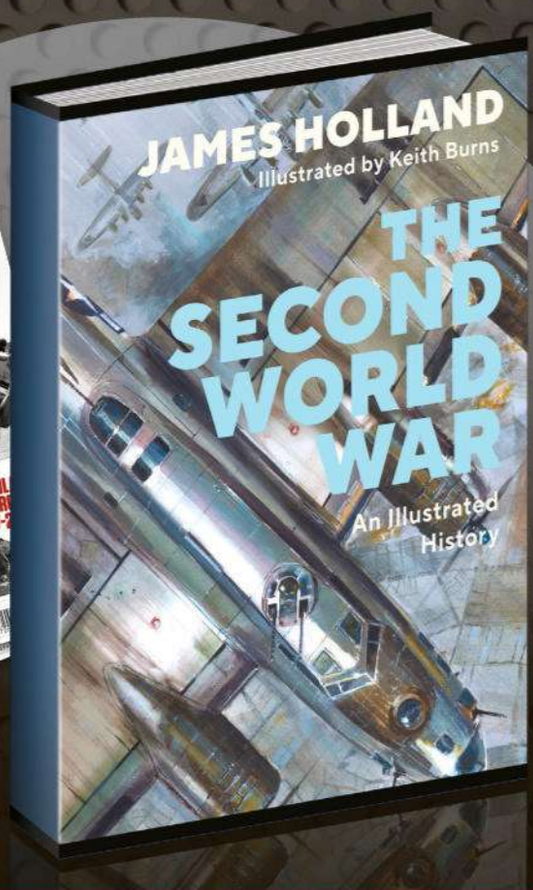

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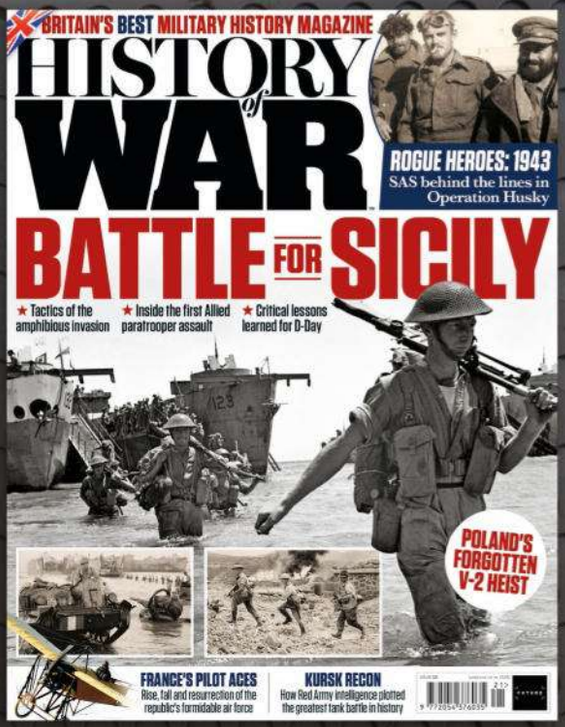
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Heroes of the Victoria Cross

AUBREY COSENS

In February 1945, as the Allies began a renewed push into Nazi Germany, a Canadian sergeant single-handedly cleared three enemy-held buildings to earn the Commonwealth's highest military honour

WORDS **ALEX BOWERS**

Amid the cacophony of exploding mortar shells, small-arms fire and the screams of wounded comrades, Aubrey Cosens crouched on top of a Sherman in plain sight of the enemy and bellowed his daring plan to the tank commander. The 23-year-old sergeant – serving with the Queen's of Rifles of Canada – requested that the armoured beast slam into the German-held building in front before he went in alone and dealt with its occupants. Trooper Bill Adams, the driver, was less than thrilled: "I was pretty careful about ramming those stone walls. Usually there's some kind of basement. We wouldn't be much use to anyone with a 30-ton Sherman tank lying around in a farm cellar."

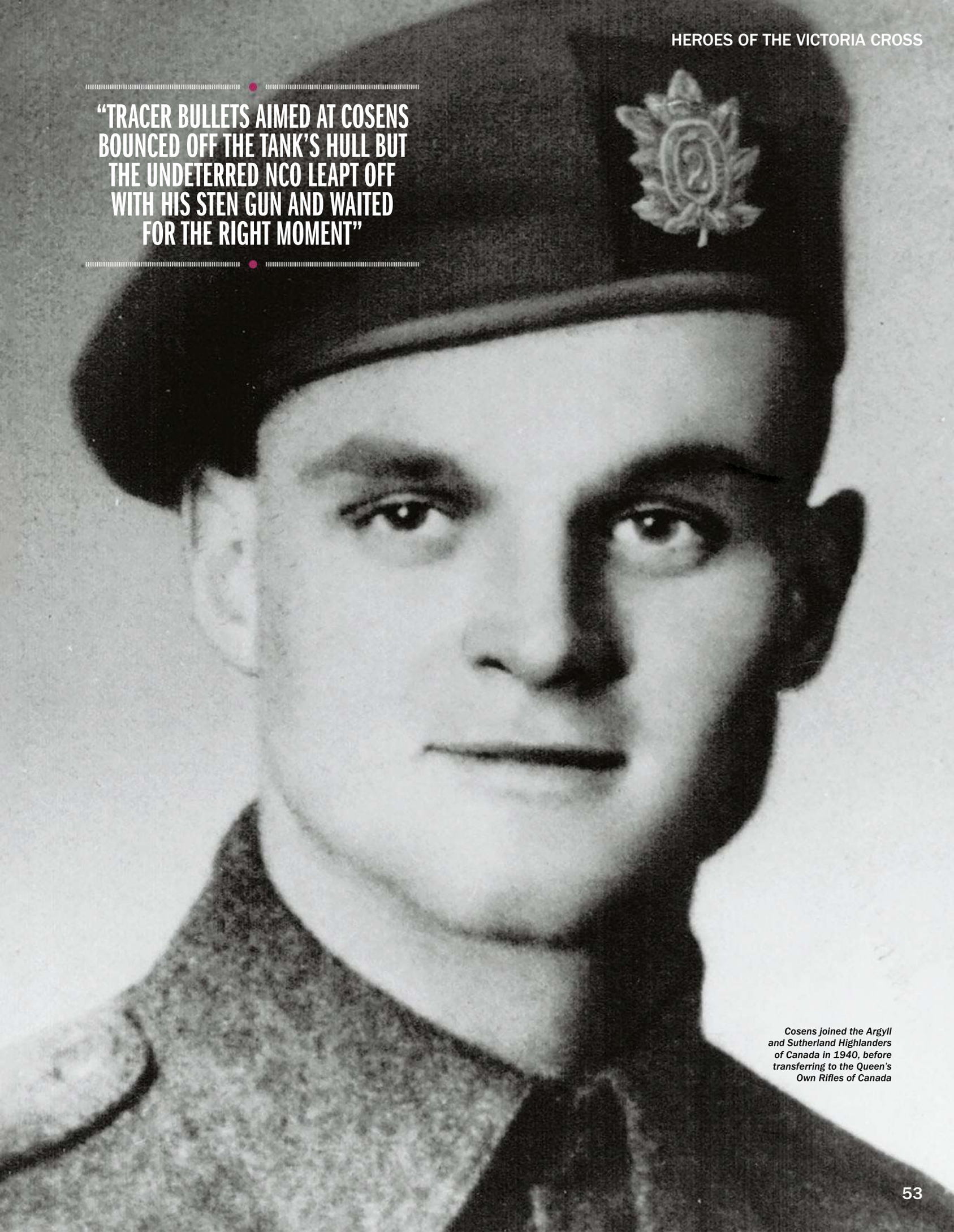
Nevertheless, Adams accepted the scheme as his vehicle lurched forward into the night. Tracer bullets aimed at Cosens bounced off the tank's hull but the undeterred NCO leapt off with his Sten gun and waited for the right moment. The Sherman's first strike against the building failed to penetrate, yet the second attempt brought the wall crashing down. With debris still falling from above, Cosens plunged into the void.

***Above:** Lance Corporal JE Cunningham of the Essex Scottish Regiment practises firing a 'Lifebuoy' flamethrower near Xanten, Germany, 10 March 1945*

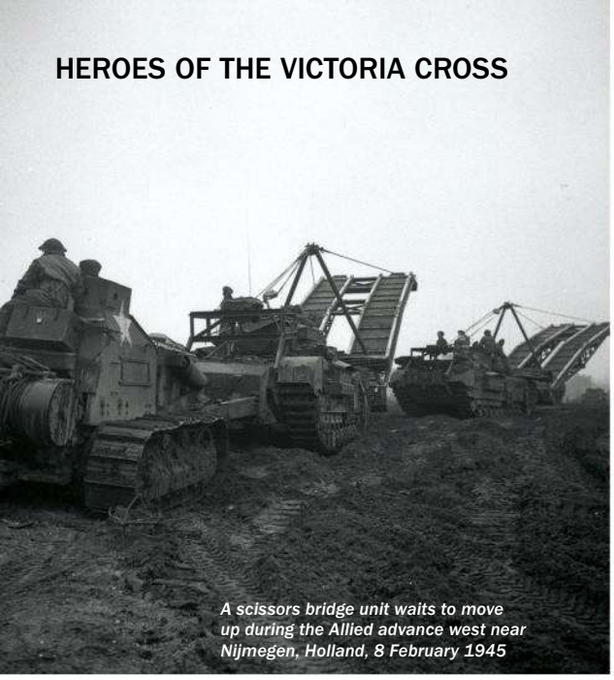
It was the early hours of 26 February 1945 and First Canadian Army was thrusting into the Rhineland as part of Operation Blockbuster. The soldiers' journey up until that point had been long and perilous, from the beaches of Normandy to the Scheldt estuary and, most recently, enduring the worst northwest European winter in 50 years. While II Canadian Corps had carried out relentless patrols and large-scale raids over the previous months, the Allies had drawn plans to take the fight further across the German border. These proposals had initially been postponed when Hitler launched the Ardennes Offensive, also known as the Battle of the Bulge, but were renewed again once the Führer's gamble had failed in the face of stout American resistance.

On 8 February 1945, First Canadian Army under General Harry Crerar had launched its own offensive, codenamed Operation Veritable. Its mission had been to advance from the north and drive the Germans back between the Maas and the Rhine Rivers. Within 48 hours, US Ninth Army had intended to cross the Roer River and complete a pincer movement dubbed Operation Grenade. However, the American push was delayed when the Germans

"TRACER BULLETS AIMED AT COSENS BOUNCED OFF THE TANK'S HULL BUT THE UNDETERRED NCO LEAPT OFF WITH HIS STEN GUN AND WAITED FOR THE RIGHT MOMENT"



Cosens joined the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders of Canada in 1940, before transferring to the Queen's Own Rifles of Canada



A scissors bridge unit waits to move up during the Allied advance west near Nijmegen, Holland, 8 February 1945

German prisoners help carry a wounded man in the vicinity of Nijmegen, 8 February 1945

sabotaged dams to prevent safe passage, enabling the enemy to shift their reserves to the Anglo-Canadian front. Crerar's forces strove ahead regardless, still tasked with trapping their opponents on the west side of the Rhine before eliminating them in full.

Not everything had gone to plan. Traipsing through flooded terrain that funnelled men into designated kill zones, First Canadian Army had attempted to break through a well-established series of defences that stood between it and the ultimate objective: the riverside city of Xanten. There, stretching as far southwest as the community of Geldern, the two Allied armies were expected to converge and deliver their killing blow, although progress had been slower than anticipated. The Germans, now defending their Fatherland rather than occupied territory, held out with new-found motivation and, in some cases, blind fanaticism. Casualties were high on both sides, but the Anglo-Canadian contingent prevailed when it overcame the Siegfried Line on 10 February.

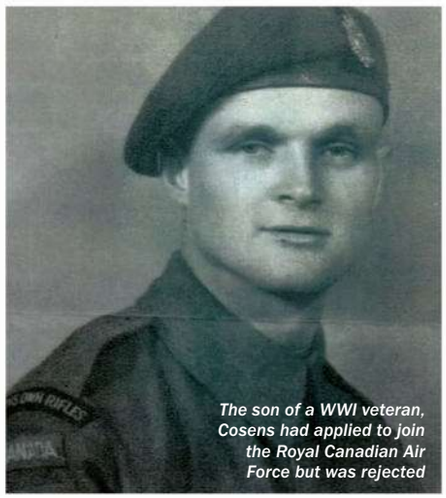
Yet there remained a formidable system of trenches, barbed wire, mines, anti-tank ditches, machine-gun emplacements and innumerable other death traps, dubbed the Hochwald Layback by the Allies. Almost as daunting was the open farmland that led up to a ridgeline preceding it. With US Ninth Army finally making significant gains from 23 February, Crerar ordered the men under his command to launch a "deliberate assault across the plateau between Calcar and Üdem against the strong enemy defences of the Hochwald". This renewed Anglo-Canadian push, codenamed Operation Blockbuster, would meet the threat. And Cosens' unit would play a considerable role in the first phase of the battle.

From around 4am on 26 February the Queen's Own Rifles of Canada stared out at the gently rising slopes dotted with farmhouses, all in clear view of the Germans scattered throughout a vast and unforgiving landscape. Their specific objectives were three hamlets – Mooshof, Wemmershof and Steeg – situated somewhere out in a strange darkness illuminated by artificial moonlight to facilitate Allied movements, its brightness reflecting off thick cloud cover to give the impression of a false dawn. Remarking on what could be

"A TOTAL OF AROUND 20 ENEMIES HAD BEEN CAPTURED BY COSENS, AND ABOUT THE SAME AMOUNT HAD BEEN KILLED THROUGH HIS INCREDIBLE EXPLOITS IN THREE SEPARATE BUILDINGS"

the regiment's "toughest scrap", A Company commander Major Dick Medland was brutally honest about the perils that could lie ahead: "A lot of us won't make it. Those who do… they'll remember it for a long time." Perhaps one of the only small comforts was having tank support from the 1st Hussars – that and hot coffee laced with rum to calm nerves.

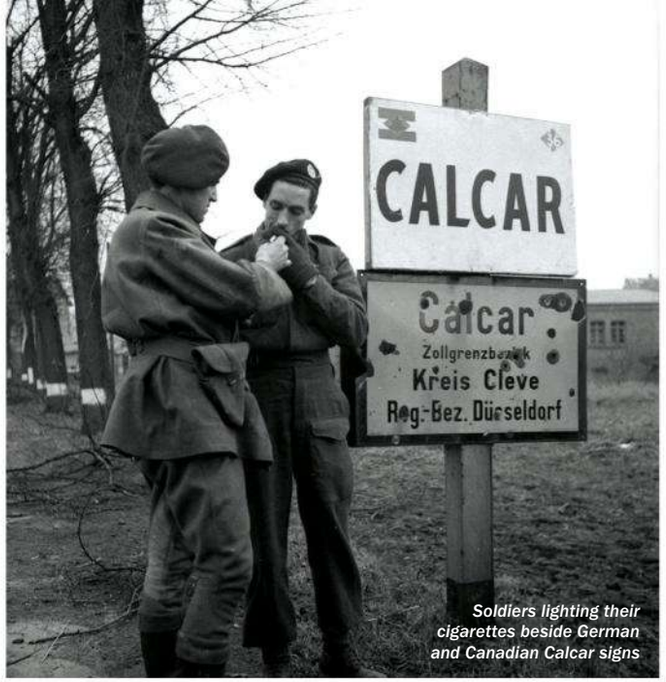
Cosens had checked his men in preparation. At one stage, finding Private Don Chittenden struggling to get his equipment ready, the sergeant had knelt down and helped him with his buckles like an attentive parent. Considered a hardened veteran by new replacements, Cosens knew what to do when the Canadians set off at 4.30am behind a creeping barrage. The enemy were quick to retaliate, dropping shells just beyond the protective screen to catch the advancing infantry. MG-42 bullets and Nebelwerfer rounds tore through the smoke, but Cosens and the lead platoons of D Company continued on to Mooshof. Claiming the assigned clutch of buildings in due course, it wasn't long until German paratroopers flung themselves into ferocious counterattacks that dislodged the Canadians' tentative hold. No 16 Platoon commander Lieutenant Don McKay was wounded, and an entire section was wiped out in the process. Among the casualties was Lance Corporal Edward William Fraser, who had been killed when he passed a window and a Schmeisser burst took his life. The number of dead and dying mounted, and those still fit and able were in terrible condition. It was then that Cosens took control of the spiralling situation.



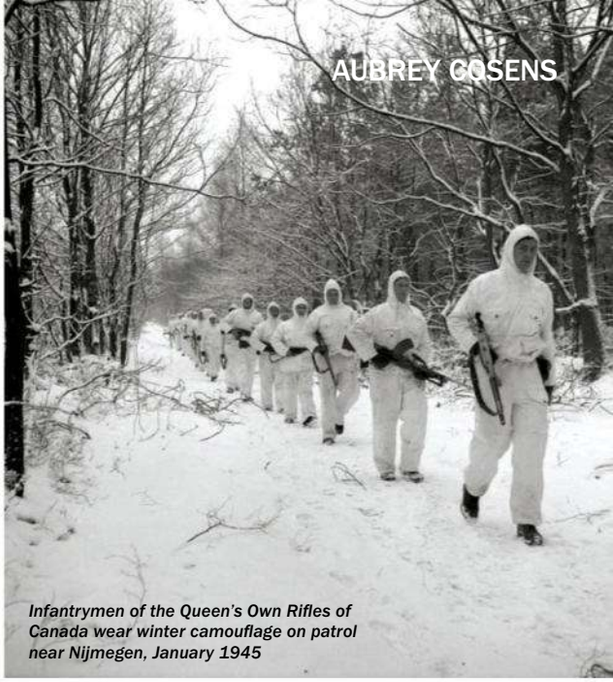
The son of a WWI veteran, Cosens had applied to join the Royal Canadian Air Force but was rejected

The small-town Ontario native and former railway worker, once hopeful of joining the air force only to be rejected in 1939, leapt into action. Twice he led survivors in assaults on the buildings, yet the bloodied attackers were beaten back each time. Just four men were left when he ordered them to provide covering fire as he dashed across several metres of exposed ground. Cosens mounted a nearby Sherman and immediately directed its main gun at German targets, despite them having a clean line of sight on him. His unwavering determination went even further when he instructed the tank to burst through the wall of the first building. The subsequent sequence of events can be little more than speculated upon. None of the sergeant's diminished platoon was with him as he darted from room to room. Nor did anyone witness him dodge gunfire, take prisoners, or kill the resisters unwilling to surrender. All that was certain was that when he emerged from the smouldering ruins, the structure had been cleared.

Cosens, spotting Fraser's body, again braved the open to drag his fallen comrade out of the tank's path en route to the next building. Adams manoeuvred his vehicle as it lobbed shells at the walls. Shortly thereafter, Cosens repeated



Soldiers lighting their cigarettes beside German and Canadian Calcar signs



AUBREY COSENS

Infantrymen of the Queen's Own Rifles of Canada wear winter camouflage on patrol near Nijmegen, January 1945

***Above:** Private WG Lourie examines a destroyed German Jagdpanther self-propelled gun in the Reichswald, Germany, 16 March 1945*

A soldier from the Queen's Own Rifles of Canada poses beside a sign in the Nijmegen sector, the start line for Operation Veritable

his heroic feat a second time, finding on this occasion that the German paratroopers had already fled – a sure sign that the tide of the battle was turning. But the Canadian NCO was far from done. Cosens crossed the road towards the final farmhouse, forced entry and got to work on the heavily defended holdout. The unmistakable sound of a gunfight informed the four infantrymen positioned outside that their sergeant was engaged in ferocious combat. After a few minutes, over a dozen German prisoners, their hands raised above their heads, filtered out. The paratroopers had been convinced to surrender when they were discovered hiding in the basement. A total of around 20 enemy combatants had been captured by Cosens, and about the same amount had been killed through his incredible exploits in three separate buildings. Unfortunately, he had overlooked at least one man. Sergeant Aubrey Cosens, just three months shy of his 24th birthday, was venturing across a small clearing to report to Major Ben Dunkelman when a single sniper shot rang out. The young Canadian died instantly.

What he had achieved in Mooshof would have a lasting impact. His tenacity had broken the German counterattacks, and with the assistance of B Company, the Queen's Own secured the hamlet. The Anglo-Canadian push struggled on over the coming days of Operation Blockbuster. Claiming village after village, the city of Xanten fell in early March, bringing the overarching Operation Veritable to an end.

Cosens' part in the campaign was recognised with a posthumous Victoria Cross. His citation reads in part: "The outstanding gallantry, initiative and determined leadership of this brave NCO… was vital to the success of the future operations of the Brigade."

Cosens is buried in Groesbeek Canadian War Cemetery at Nijmegen in the Netherlands. His remarkable legacy lives on through many honours, including a since-retired tourist steamer, a bridge in Ontario, and the Latchford Royal Canadian Legion branch being named after him. Undoubtedly most powerful are the testimonials from his surviving comrades, praising his strength of character and ability to boost morale in the darkest of hours.

Images: The Queen's Own Rifles of Canada Museum and Archives, Library and Archives Canada / Government of Canada, Getty

VICKERS MEDIUM MKI TANK

The Vickers Medium tank was an inter-war tank developed by the British, and a few saw action in 1939-40

WORDS **CRAIG MOORE**

Vickers developed its Medium MkI tank as a private commercial venture in competition with the British government's funded Medium D, Medium C and Light Tank projects. Vickers' gamble paid off as the officially financed designs failed to meet expectations and were rejected by the Royal Armoured Corps (RAC). Confusingly, the two Vickers prototypes were called A2E1, Tank, Light MkI but the design was later redesignated as the Vickers Medium MkI tank as it weighed 11.7 tons. It was a very modern design that was bristling with machine guns on every side and had a three-pounder(1.36kg) gun mounted in a turret that could traverse 360°.

Vickers manufactured 286 Medium MkI tanks in a number of different versions. The RAC used them for training, and they took part in exercises on Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire, to test out new theories on how to deploy a mechanised army. They equipped the RAC from 1924 to the mid-1930s. Some tanks had their three-pounder gun replaced with a 15-pounder (6.8kg) mortar, and this version became known as the Close Support tank. It only fired smoke shells to lay down a smoke screen to make the tanks and infantry difficult to see and target by the enemy.

MAIN WEAPON
The three-pounder MkI L32 main gun was upgraded in the MkII version to a three-pounder MkII L40. It was a more powerful, higher-velocity gun with a longer barrel.

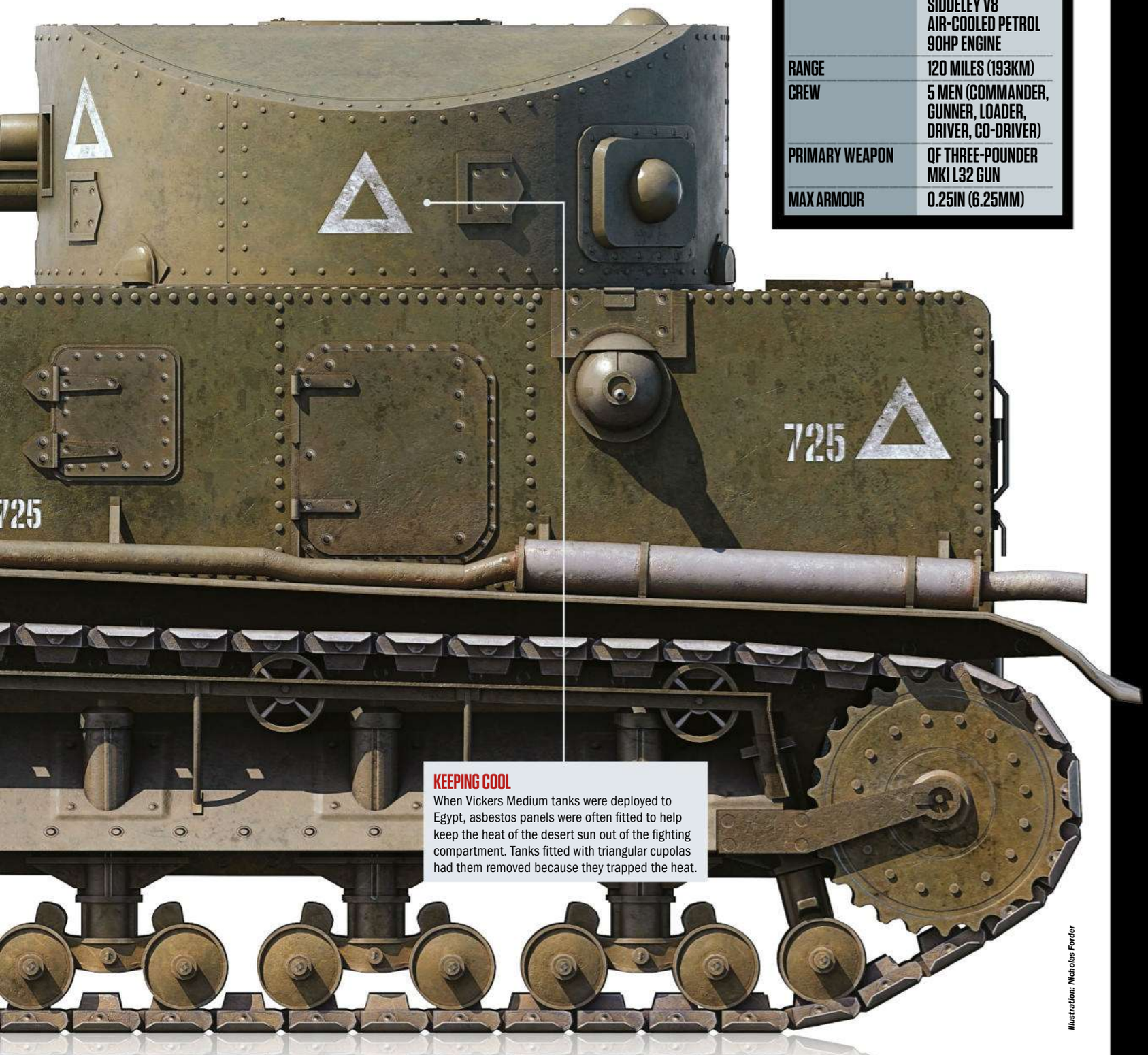
DRIVER'S POSITION
Due to complaints from drivers of the MkI tanks, the driver's position was raised in the MkII version of the Vickers Medium tank to help improve his view of the terrain.

EXPOSED WHEELS
The small road wheels were exposed on the Vickers Medium MkI tank and could easily be damaged by direct fire or shrapnel. Armoured protection was added on the MkII versions of the tank.

"THE ROYAL ARMOURED CORPS USED THEM FOR TRAINING, AND THEY TOOK PART IN EXERCISES ON SALISBURY PLAIN TO TEST NEW THEORIES ON HOW TO DEPLOY A MECHANISED ARMY"

VICKERS MEDIUM MKI TANK

PRODUCTION	1924
ORIGIN	BRITISH
LENGTH	17FT 6IN (5.33M)
MAX SPEED	15MPH (24KM/H)
ENGINE	ARMSTRONG SIDDELEY V8 AIR-COOLED PETROL 90HP ENGINE
RANGE	120 MILES (193KM)
CREW	5 MEN (COMMANDER, GUNNER, LOADER, DRIVER, CO-DRIVER)
PRIMARY WEAPON	QF THREE-POUNDER MKI L32 GUN
MAX ARMOUR	0.25IN (6.25MM)



KEEPING COOL

When Vickers Medium tanks were deployed to Egypt, asbestos panels were often fitted to help keep the heat of the desert sun out of the fighting compartment. Tanks fitted with triangular cupolas had them removed because they trapped the heat.

Illustration: Nicholas Forder

This is the gunner's position where he operated the QF three-pounder MkI L32 gun

The gun was aimed by looking through the vision port. The gunner risked injury from small arms fire and shrapnel

ARMAMENT

The tank was armed with a quick-firing three-pounder MkI L32 gun mounted in a turret that could traverse 360°, with a Hotchkiss machine gun fixed in a separate coaxial ball mount to the right of the main gun. The turret had two additional Hotchkiss machine gun ball mounts at the rear. A third anti-aircraft ball mount was added to the rear of the turret roof of the MkIA version. Two heavier water-cooled Vickers machine guns were mounted in larger ball mounts in the both sides of the hull superstructure.

British Vickers Medium MkI (48) and MkII tanks of the Royal Armoured Corps driving cross-country during tests on a tank proving ground at Bovington Camp in Dorset, 8 December 1939

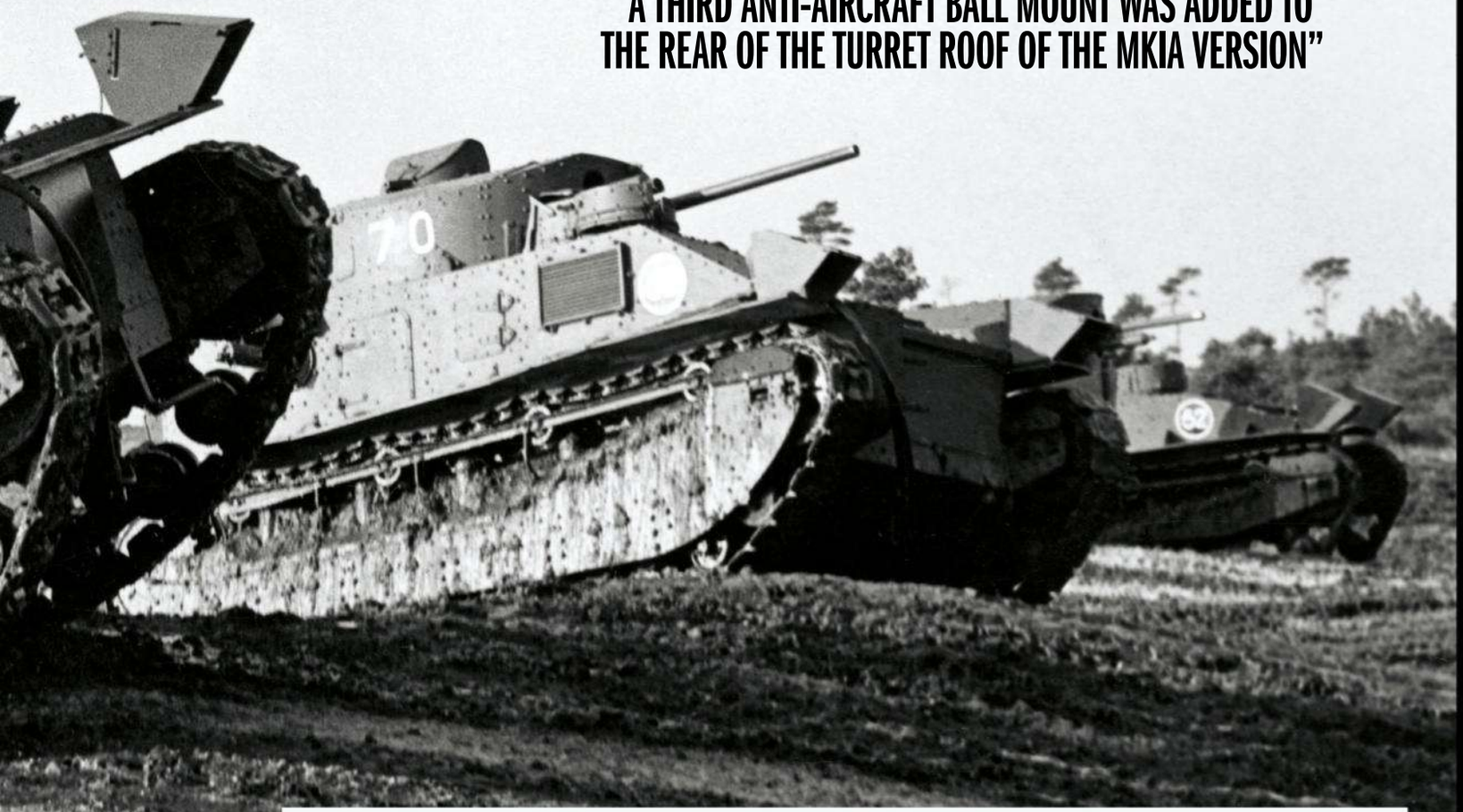
DESIGN

Some initial design flaws were corrected in the later MkII version of the tank. The tank commander in the MkI iteration did not have a cupola in the top of the turret, and a triangular-shaped cupola was added to the MkII so he had some protection from small-arms fire. The Hotchkiss coaxial machine gun was replaced with a Vickers machine gun and a lead counterweight was added to the rear of the turret to aid in gun stability in the MkIA and MkII versions of the tank.

The Vickers Medium MkI tank bears more of a resemblance to a WWII Sherman tank than a British WWI tank

The engine was at the front, above which were numerous louvered vents to help with cooling

"A THIRD ANTI-AIRCRAFT BALL MOUNT WAS ADDED TO THE REAR OF THE TURRET ROOF OF THE MKIA VERSION"



ENGINE

The tank was powered by an Armstrong Siddeley V8 air-cooled petrol 90hp engine fixed in an engine bay at the front of the tank on the left side. It was separated from the crew compartment by metal plates. The driver sat on the right side next to the engine. During winter training exercises on Salisbury Plain this meant that the driver was kept warm, but during the summer it was very hot work driving the tank. It only had a maximum road speed of 15mph (24km/h).

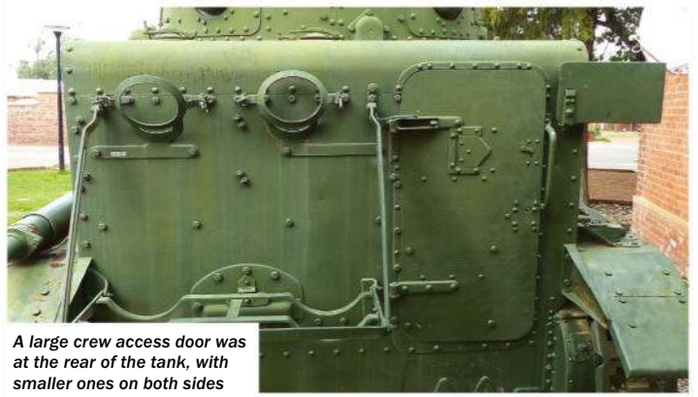
There was a large armoured hatch at the front of the tank that gave access to the engine

A demonstration of a Vickers Medium MkI tank for Dominion prime ministers at Camberley, 13 November 1926

SERVICE HISTORY

In 1933, Vickers Medium tanks were sent to Egypt to provide colonial security and protect the Suez Canal. Vickers Medium tanks were considered obsolete in 1939 when the Second World War started, and most had been replaced by more modern tanks. From photographs it appears that two Vickers Medium MkIIA tanks were still in service in 1940 when the Italians invaded Egypt. One was pictured in a dug-in defensive position with only the turret exposed, while the other was left exposed. They were part of the defences around Mersa Matruh. Between 1930 and 1937 the Royal Australian Armoured Corps trained their tank crews using four Vickers Medium MkII tanks. Two were sent to South Africa. The Soviet Union purchased 15 Vickers Medium MkII tanks and used them in dug-in defensive positions on the Karelian Isthmus during the 1939 Winter War against the Finnish Army.

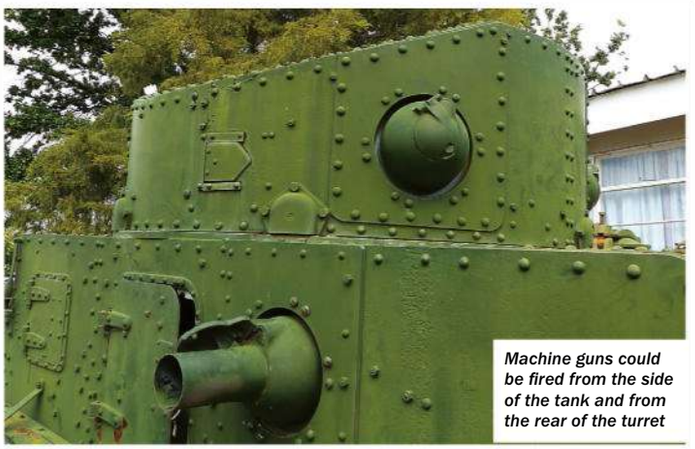
"THE SOVIET UNION PURCHASED 15 VICKERS MEDIUM MKII TANKS AND USED THEM IN DUG-IN DEFENSIVE POSITIONS ON THE KARELIAN ISTHMUS DURING THE 1939 WINTER WAR"



A large crew access door was at the rear of the tank, with smaller ones on both sides

The tank commander in the MkI tank did not have cupola. A triangular-shaped cupola was added to the MkII

The driver sat on the right at the front. He steered using two tillers



Machine guns could be fired from the side of the tank and from the rear of the turret

CREW COMPARTMENT

The driver sat on the right at the front of the tank and steered using two large tillers. The gunner sat on the left of the turret at the front, with the tank commander sat behind him. The loader's position was on the right of the main gun and the other two members of the crew manned the Vickers machine guns that protruded from both sides of the tank. They could also fire the machine gun at the rear of the turret while the gunner engaged targets at the front.

Images Getty, Wiki / PD / Gov

WWII'S FORGOTTEN V-2 HEIST

In the summer of 1944, a daring mission was launched to retrieve an intact German rocket, recovered by the Polish Home Army, to analyse and counter Hitler's devastating vengeance weapon

WORDS MAREK SOBIERALSKI

From 13 June 1944, London was enduring deadly V-2 missile attacks, and there was an urgent need for as much intelligence on these new and terrifying weapons as possible. England had already experienced sustained terror bombing by the earlier V-1 rockets. Approximately 10,000 of these were fired towards the country, of which 2,419 reached London, killing over 6,000 people and injuring nearly 18,000. The British developed countermeasures to the V-1, utilising anti-aircraft guns, barrage balloons and fighter plane interceptors. But the V-2 was different: it couldn't be intercepted or shot down because it arrived at its designated target so fast that no warning could be given.

Meanwhile, the Polish Home Army (Armia Krajowa) had managed to recover an unexploded V-2 rocket, and sent it to Warsaw for analysis. There, it was decided that the rocket and vital information should be delivered to the Allies in London. An ambitious and daring plan was quickly developed, but it would run into a number of unexpected difficulties. Operation Most III (British cryptonym, Wildhorn III) was the most famous of a series of missions organised by the VI (Special) Department of the Polish Commander-in-Chief's Staff in co-operation with the Special Operations Executive (SOE). These involved flights to and from occupied Poland, bringing intelligence, agents, equipment and Home Army field commanders to London for meetings with the Polish Government in Exile.

As early as 1940, Colonel Stefan Rowecki had proposed a series of two-way flights between occupied Poland and the West to create air bridges for the movement of specialist war material, intelligence and military personnel from the Polish Home Army. In 1942, he proposed landing seaplanes on Polish lakes, as well as flying light passenger planes from Sweden and landing them in fields next to Polish manor houses. The British Chiefs of Staff Committee's initial response was negative, mainly due to a lack of suitable aircraft. At the time, the only type of plane with sufficient range was the Halifax, but it required long concrete runways. It was only after obtaining newly designed twin-engine Douglas C-47 Skytrains (Dakotas), with a range of 1,600 miles (2,575km), that it was possible to put the idea into action. In 1944 a series of flights and missions began, known as Operation Most (meaning bridge in Polish), and Operation Wildhorn by its British cryptonym. Out of five missions planned, three were successfully completed. They were undertaken from the Campo Casale air base near Brindisi in Italy, flying into occupied Poland and landing at airfields protected by Polish Home Army units.

The first such operation, Most I, set out from Italy on 15 April with a British-Polish crew under the command of Flight Lieutenant E.J. Harrod. The aircraft landed in a clover field near the village of Matczyn, 22 miles (35km) from Lublin. Two Polish Cichociemni agents were on board, carrying two suitcases containing mail, US Dollars, blank Kennkartes (basic identity documents in use inside Germany), and a camera and films, which were to be handed over for use by the Home Army. Just 15 minutes after landing, the plane took off for its return journey, this time carrying senior military personnel, an envoy of the Polish Government and a representative of the Polish People's Party. The plane was hit by anti-aircraft fire in the vicinity of Budapest, but ultimately made it back safely, returning to the base in Italy after a flight lasting over ten hours.

The second mission began soon after, on 29 May, when a Dakota, KG477 'V', took off from the Campo Casale air base. The aircraft had an additional four fuel tanks installed, which allowed about 14 hours of flight time. It was initially escorted by two Liberator B-24s, and all three planes were slightly damaged by anti-aircraft fire over Yugoslavia. The plane landed on a field covered with knee-length grass just after midnight, 11 miles (18km) from Tarnów, on the Kisielina River. Two Cichociemni agents were on board, carrying nearly half a ton of supplies for the Home Army. The plane took off for its return journey after just seven minutes, carrying other Cichociemni agents going in the other direction, and an emissary of the People's Party, safely returning to its base in Italy after an eight-and-a-half hour flight.

Meanwhile, the British were deeply concerned by the V-2's continuing deployment and development, in particular its highly advanced technology, which could be a serious threat to the home front. Allied planners urgently needed key information about the

The flight took off from Italy and flew unescorted deep into Occupied Europe

The operation used a Dakota fitted with four additional fuel tanks

The first US test of a captured German V-2 rocket, 1946

"THERE WAS AN URGENT NEED FOR AS MUCH INTELLIGENCE AS POSSIBLE ON THESE NEW AND TERRIFYING WEAPONS"

Images: Getty, Wiki / PD / Gov

Wladyslaw Raczkiewicz (left), president of Poland, and Tomasz Arciszewski, prime minister of the Polish Government in Exile

Deadly V-2 rockets were impossible to intercept due to their high speed and sophisticated guidance system

Colonel Stefan Rowecki proposed the idea for the secret Allied flights

weapon, and ideally an actual missile they could examine themselves. This seemed highly unlikely, but an opportunity would soon present itself. This was thanks to RAF bombing and the subsequent need to relocate the missile test range facilities from the Peenemünde Army Research Center on the Baltic coast, to southeast Poland, beyond the range of Allied bombers.

The Home Army carefully monitored V-2 launches and tried to recover pieces of the missiles that fell back to earth. This demanding and dangerous work meant they would frequently face SS and other German forces patrolling the area. They had already managed to smuggle out several important V-2 components that clearly demonstrated just how advanced the new German missile was. On 20 May 1944 a V-2 was launched and landed mostly intact on the swampy banks of the Bug River. Home Army troops quickly located the crash site and hid the large rocket, as the Germans were also urgently searching for it. Soon, scientists who had arrived from Warsaw to assist the Home Army dismantled the V-2 and removed it from the area in pieces hidden in farmers' carts. Every part was carefully recorded, diagrams were drawn and the components were photographed. The most important elements were placed into suitcases and preparations were made to smuggle them out of occupied Poland, right under the Germans' noses.

Eventually, 267 Squadron, an RAF transport unit based at Brindisi and equipped with Dakotas, was assigned to retrieve the vital intelligence, and Operation Most III could commence. A single Dakota was to fly across occupied Europe and land in a sugar beet field, 37 miles (60km) east of Kraków. Home Army soldiers would secure the landing strip, guide the Dakota in and quickly load the cases on board, before turning the plane around for its journey back to Italy. The operation was extremely dangerous, and German forces were stationed close by as the area was teaming with units retreating westward from the Red Army. This would make the operation even more risky and the Dakota would be flying through German controlled airspace, meaning that it would be exposed to flak and the ever-present night fighters.

Heavy June rains had saturated the proposed landing ground and caused the mission to be postponed until late July 1944. Then to add to

"EVERY PART WAS CAREFULLY RECORDED, DIAGRAMS WERE DRAWN AND THE COMPONENTS WERE PHOTOGRAPHED"

An American soldier stands beside a captured railway wagon loaded with part of a V-2, April 1945

the tension, the day before the operation was about to be launched, a German flak unit of 100 men and three guns took up residence at a school just over 0.5 miles (1km) from the airstrip. In addition, some German spotter planes had actually landed in the field that the Dakota was due to land in the following night. The next morning the Luftwaffe planes left, but the German flak remained nearby. The Home Army brought in more troops to defend the makeshift airstrip in case the Germans tried to interfere with the operation.

That night, on 25 July, the Dakota arrived over the airfield – code-named Motyl – on schedule at just past midnight. As it circled, men with oil lanterns lined the field to guide the plane in. The noise of the plane was extremely loud, but as yet the Germans hadn't responded. As soon as the Dakota landed and then rolled to a halt, Home Army soldiers quickly began loading the plane with the precious cargo, as well as a handful of passengers. After some tense moments in which the plane refused to restart for takeoff, the Dakota made it safely back to Brindisi. Two days later it arrived in London, where British scientists urgently studied the haul of intelligence, hoping to devise a way to interfere with the V-2 missile's guidance system.

Later, Operation Most IV was to see the extraction from Poland of Cichociemni agents and politicians, as well as RAF officer John Ward. While the plane was en route, a coded message reported worsening weather, so the aircraft was turned back. Later attempts were thwarted by the Red Army's offensive. The final mission was to be carried out in mid-January 1945, at the request of 17 American, ten British and six Polish airmen, who'd managed to save themselves after their planes were shot down over Poland. The Mucha airstrip near Tymbark was prepared, and Dakotas of the 10th US Tactical Fleet were to pick them up. However, the Soviet offensive of the 4th Ukrainian Front in the area ultimately meant there was no further point to the mission.

Meanwhile, the Germans increased their V-2 missile launches and over the following months Britain was hit over 1,400 times in what was essentially the first ballistic missile campaign in history. Belgium was also struck over 1,600 times, as were France and the Netherlands, although in smaller numbers. In London the V-2s would kill and injure thousands. While the material smuggled out from Poland enabled the British to fully understand the weapon's technology, and to try and develop ways of misdirecting the missiles, the bombardment continued. Efforts to stop the missile using radio waves came to nothing when it was discovered that its mechanism was designed not to react to countermeasures by radio. The last V-2 landed on Orpington in Kent on 27 March 1945, and caused the last Second World War fatality on British soil.

THE FLIGHT OF DAKOTA KG477

History of War reader Darren Little wrote in to share the story of his great uncle, who took part in the daring RAF operation, Wildhorn III, to transport the recovered V-2 to London. Here he recounts the thrilling story of Flight Sergeant John Appleby and his crewmates

"My great uncle, John Appleby, DFM [Distinguished Flying Medal], from Cwmbran, South Wales, was a flight sergeant wireless operator serving in the RAF Volunteer Reserve.

"In the Autumn of 1943, Appleby's Dakota was deployed to clandestine duties, dropping supplies to assorted resistance movements. Appleby flew in his first such sortie – to Kos, Greece – on 2 October 1943, and another – codenamed Cyanide – on 22 March 1944. By November 1944, Appleby and his crew had carried out 34 clandestine missions. He was not only charged with his normal duties as a wireless operator, but also with burning important paperwork and logbooks, as well as destroying the aircraft and assisting in evading capture, should his aircraft go down over enemy territory.

"After the Polish Home Army (AK) recovered a V-2 intact, in May 1944, it fell to Appleby and his crew to transport the rocket parts back to London for analysis. No fewer than 19 suitcases containing specialised equipment and V-2 parts, reports and photographs were readied to be smuggled, together with a small group of Polish scientists. Contact having been made with the Air Ministry, the daring plans for Operation Wildhorn III were set in motion.

"On the night of 25-26 July 1944, Appleby was selected as wireless operator on Dakota KG477 'V', together with Flight Lieutenant CG Culliford (captain), Flying Officer KJ Szrajer (second pilot and translator), Flying Officer J Pemberton-Williams (navigator).

"Their aircraft was stripped of all armaments – they carried only one small pistol between them – and the Dakota was fitted with four long-range cabin fuel tanks for the dangerous journey that lay ahead. Escorted by two Liberators during the daylight hours, the crew would have to fly on alone at the onset of dusk. As Flying Officer Szrajer put it: 'The Dakota was a sitting duck.'

"As well as returning the important cargo, Dakota KG477 'V' was charged with the delivery of important Polish agents – Major Wolniak, Captain Billski and Second Lieutenant Starzynski – who were destined for the underground and carrying suitcases crammed with 'special equipment'.

"The landing strip at Nowy Korczyn east of Warsaw was codenamed 'Motyl' (Butterfly) and was situated near a forest. It was prepared by Polish Air Force Officer Wlodek, who was also to act as security on the night of the British landing. Wlodek was a key player and since the bomb had been transported in a stolen German lorry, had acted as guard over the parts, keeping a keen eye on the local area, which bristled with some 4,000 German troops retreating from the Eastern Front and destined for defeat in Normandy.

"'Having got 'wheels up' at 1730 hours from Bari, Italy, just one Liberator managed to get airborne, the other suffering engine issues. Parting company on crossing the River Sava, KG477 pressed on over the Hungarian plain at 7,500 feet [2286m], with all thankfully appearing quiet apart from five bursts of flak near Skolnok.

"As Appleby and his crew drew near, they gave a light signal 'O' and received the correct signal 'N' in return from the AK: the mission was on. At the signal of a whistle, everyone on the landing field removed the cardboard sleeves from their lanterns but the Dakota was a little too high and aborted its first landing attempt, Baszak later commented that it 'wailed like the devil'. On the second attempt, the Dakota was safely down.

"A quick exchange was made, with the cargo and agents exiting the plane and the precious delivery being loaded, together with return passengers Chmielewski, Retinger, Arcizewski of the Socialist Party, Second Lieutenant Chciuk and Micinski. All appeared to be running smooth but when Culliford attempted to get the Dakota airborne again, it was stuck fast in the boggy ground. For a moment it appeared the brakes had been applied in error, despite the controls stating their release. Given the proximity of the German unit, who may well have been alerted to the plane's presence, time was now of the essence.

"The crew, undoubtedly aware of the grim fate that awaited them if they failed, cut the links to the brake fluid drums but it made no difference; further engine boosts also failed to shift the Dakota and it appeared the mission might have to be aborted. Culliford prepared to destroy the aircraft but was persuaded to stay a little longer.

"A spade was produced and some hard digging and a further engine boost made the Dakota slew slightly to starboard, with the port wheel having done one-quarter of a rotation. At this point the aircraft was again unloaded and Appleby tore up all his documents and placed them ready to set fire to the Dakota. With further pleading from Wlodek and an apparent delay in the approach of the German patrol, Culliford allowed for 30 minutes of hard digging. Finally, mercifully, the Dakota was released from the quagmire and it ran in a brake-less circle, just missing a stone wall on the edge of the strip.

"Culliford quickly deployed his landing light and, aiming at a green light in the far corner of the field, he got the plane up to 65mph [105kp/h] and managed to take off. Pilot, crew, passengers and their vital cargo crossed the Yugoslavian frontier just before daylight and then across the Adriatic. Culliford was forced to make a brake-less landing at Brindisi on a runway still under construction. Their remarkable feat won high praise, Wing Commander Francombe of No 267 Squadron describing their sortie as 'one of the most outstanding and epic flights of the War by an unarmed transport aircraft'. For his part in Operation Wildhorn III, John Appleby was awarded the Polish Cross of Valour."

With thanks to Darren Little for sharing his great uncle's story.

Flight Sergeant John Appleby was awarded the Polish Cross of Valour

Images: Getty, Wiki / PD / Gov

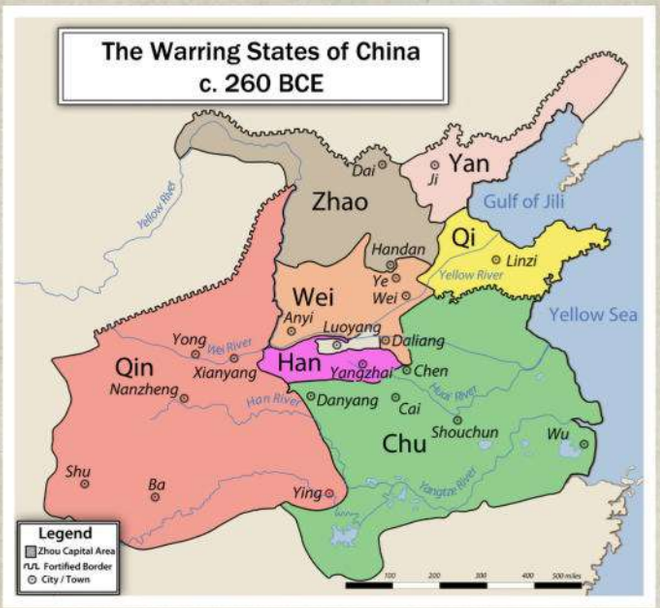
BATTLE OF JINGXING

Strategic brilliance and an audacious plan ensured victory for the underdog in this legendary clash in ancient China

WORDS **NEIL CROSSLEY**

***Left:** Liu Bang (pictured) promoted Han Xin to general*

China's Taihang Mountains, scene of the Battle of Jingxing between the Han and Zhao armies in 205 BCE



***Above:** A political map of China during the Warring States period, c.260 BCE*

When it comes to assessing the causes of military disasters over the ages, one that appears time and again is the capacity of military leaders to underestimate their enemies. This was the case in October 205 BCE, when the combined forces of the Zhao army took on the much smaller force of the Han army in the rugged Taihang Mountains of northwest China.

The battle was catastrophic for the Zhao army, which was outwitted, outmanoeuvred and annihilated by a Han force less than one-sixth its size. The general commanding the Han army was Han Xin, a mercurial character who would go on to become the greatest military strategist in Chinese history. Han Xin's strategy that day would become the stuff of legend. It's a credit to him that over two millennia later, the Battle of Jingxing is remembered for the audacious brilliance of his battle plan.

The Warring States

The Battle of Jingxing took place towards the end of a period of ancient Chinese history known as the Warring States. This was an era defined by military conflict and rife with fractured alliances, scurrilous betrayals and fervent territorial ambition. Sixteen years prior to the battle, in 221 BCE, the Qin dynasty had been established as the first dynasty of a unified Imperial China. But by 208 BCE, the Qin had been overthrown by a rebellion.

In 207 BCE, one of the rebels, a noble called Xiang Yu, asserted his leadership of the rebel armies and joined forces with the anti-Qin leader Liu Bang. Xiang Yu and Liu Bang teamed up to overthrow the Qin, but their allegiance was to be short-lived. By 205 BCE they were at war with each other for control of China.

"THE BATTLE OF JINGXING TOOK PLACE TOWARDS THE END OF A PERIOD OF CHINESE HISTORY KNOWN AS THE WARRING STATES – AN ERA DEFINED BY MILITARY CONFLICT"

The Battle of Pengcheng

Liu Bang's military aspirations did not start well. In April 205 BCE he suffered a major defeat by Xiang Yu at the Battle of Pengcheng, when 100,000 of his panicked, retreating troops were driven into the waters of the Suishi River and massacred. According to *Records of the Grand Historian* by Chinese astrologer and historian Sima Qian, the corpses were so numerous that they blocked the river's flow.

To add to Liu Bang's woes, his father and wife had been taken as hostages, and the states of Wei, Dai and Zhao defected to Xiang Yu. But Liu Bang had a major asset within his ranks – a soldier called Han Xin, who would help transform Liu Bang's fortunes.

Gifted strategist

Han Xin had initially joined Xiang Liang's rebel army and had repeatedly suggested strategies only to be consistently ignored. In 206 BCE, the exasperated Han Xin deserted

***Below:** An image depicting the Battle of Wei River, which followed Han Xin's victory at Jingxing*

Images: Alamy, Getty Images, Wikimedia Commons

***Above:** Qin Shi Huang was the founder of the Qin dynasty and the first emperor of a unified China*

Qin Shi Huang ordered the construction of the Great Wall of China to begin in 221 BCE

Xiang Liang and went to join Liu Bang. For a time he fared no better, and within months he was facing execution for violating military law. He only escaped by speaking forthrightly to one of Liu Bang's trusted generals minutes before the axe came down. "I thought the king wanted to rule an empire," implored Han Xin. "Why is he killing valiant men then?"

The general spared his life and recommended him to Liu Bang. Han Xin was eventually promoted to the rank of general and he immediately set his sights on conquering the kingdoms of northern China. He formulated a strategy to secure the manpower, food and wealth of northern China for Liu Bang while keeping Xiang Yu distracted in China's Central Plain.

Depleted forces

In the summer of 205 BCE, Han Xin and his armies moved northeast, conquering the states of Wei and Dai. His next objective was the kingdom of Zhao. His ambitions suffered a blow when Liu Bang ordered that most of Han Xin's elite soldiers be sent south to assist in the Xinyang-Chenggao theatre. Han Xin complied, but despite now leading a seriously depleted and largely untrained army, he refused to abandon the attack on Zhao state.

He proceeded eastward towards the Taihang Mountains, at the end of which lay Jingxing Pass, a point of entry into the Zhao heartland. Meanwhile, the large royal army of Zhao, led by Zhao Xie and Chen Yu, positioned itself at the eastern end of the long, narrow pass ready to defend the Zhao kingdom. The Zhao forces numbered 200,000. Han Xin had just 30,000.

The path ahead

But Han Xin had luck on his side. One of the Zhao warlords had advised Chen Yu to block off important routes across the Taihang Mountains, especially the Jingxing Pass, to cut off Han Xin's rear once he had entered the mountains. But

“JUST BEFORE DAWN, HAN XIN ENSURED HIS TROOPS ATE A SIMPLE BREAKFAST, ADDING THAT THEY WOULD FEAST UPON DESTROYING THE ZHAO ARMY”

Chen Yu was a follower of Confucianism and prided himself on commanding with righteousness. He responded that he had no desire to win through dishonourable means and had no need for such a strategy anyway, since his army was so superior to that of Han Xin.

It was a catastrophic decision. Had Chen Yu followed the advice then Han Xin’s army, far from home, would have been beset by logistical problems and disintegrated. Han Xin learned of this decision from one of his spies in the Zhao camp. This lack of intervention left the path open for him to set in motion a plan that was as audacious as it was astute.

A daring deployment

Once the forces of Han Xin were within the Jingxing Pass, they saw the Zhao army encamped on the plain to the east. In the middle of the night, Han Xin sent 2,000 hand-picked light cavalry to exit the Taihang Mountains along a goat track and find a position that overlooked the Zhao army, behind their encampment. He gave them orders to seize the Zhao camp when the opportunity presented itself.

Just before dawn, Han Xin ensured his troops ate a simple breakfast, adding that they would feast upon destroying the Zhao army. Not even his officers believed him. Han Xin then sent an advance force of 10,000 men through the Jingxing Pass into the Central Plain and ordered them to take up position with their backs against the Tao River.

By daylight, according to Sima Qian, the Zhao soldiers were laughing at the fact that the Han troops were knowingly placing themselves in such a vulnerable position.

Fight or die

At dawn, once the advanced guard had taken up its position, Han Xin and his remaining 18,000 infantry troops – displaying the banners and drums of General-in-Chief Han Xin’s office – marched down the east side of the Jingxing Pass onto the Central Plain.

On seeing this, Chen Yu ordered the Zhao army to attack from its encampment to the east. Han Xin’s main force fought for some time before conducting a feigned retreat towards the position of the advance guard on the river, abandoning some of their flags and drums. The Han army’s advance guard opened its ranks to receive their comrades.

Tactically, Han Xin’s decision to order his men to form up with their backs to the river seemed little short of suicide. With the swift-flowing river behind them there was no line of retreat for the Han army, and they could have been slaughtered. But for Han Xin, it was a strategy borne out of necessity. Most of his elite troops had been requisitioned by Liu Bang, and Han Xin knew their only means of survival was to instil a fight-to-the-death mentality among his relatively weak and untrained troops.

With the Zhao army approaching, Han Xin shouted to his troops: “There is no way back for you. You will only die if you don’t fight bravely.”

No way back

In retrospect, it seems an absurd and unlikely outcome, but instilling this mentality in the Han soldiers galvanised them. They were also aided by the fact that the riverside position was difficult to flank. The Zhao followed the retreating forces and clashed with the Han by the river.

The Zhao poured more and more troops against the Han, leaving their own camp vulnerable. On seeing this, the light cavalry advance force that Han Xin had dispatched to the mountains the previous night seized the Zhao camp and raised the red banners of the Han army.

Against sizable odds, the Han infantry at the river began to repel the Zhao troops, who started to withdraw. But when they turned back towards their camp and saw the red banners of the Han hanging from the barricades, panic set in. Han Xin used this to order a counterattack with the main Han force. The Zhao army, now in disarray, soon collapsed and its remnants fled. Chen Yu was eventually caught on the Zhi River and cut down.

Lasting legacy

At the victory feast after the battle, Han Xin’s officers, all somewhat astounded by their immense good fortune, asked Han Xin to explain the reasoning behind his deployments. He replied that as he was leading a much smaller army consisting of largely inexperienced troops, he had to resort to drastic measures in order to force everyone to fight harder. Han Xin’s strategy would lead to the saying: ‘You achieve survival by fighting from a position of certain death.’

The Han victory at the Battle of Jingxing significantly bolstered Liu Bang’s power base. In 204 BCE Han Xin won three more battles against Zhao and captured the capital of Handan. By the age of just 25, he was appointed commander-in-chief. He would later confront Chu forces sent to wrest control of the state on two separate occasions and annihilate both hosts.

By 203 BCE, Liu Bang had conferred on Han Xin the titles of King of Qi and King of Chu. However, he soon began to fear Han Xin’s growing influence, and in 202 BCE he demoted him. Six years later Han Xin would be accused of participating in a rebellion, lured into a trap and executed by Empress Lü Zhi.

Undefeated in battle, Han Xin would become known as the ‘God of War’. It was his guile, pragmatism and sheer vision that ensured he and his relatively untrained army prevailed at the Battle of Jingxing. The fact that he is still regarded as the finest martial mind in the annals of Chinese history is testament to his tactical brilliance.

Legend has it that Han Xin was stabbed to death with bamboo swords

Images: Alamy, Getty Images, Wikimedia Commons

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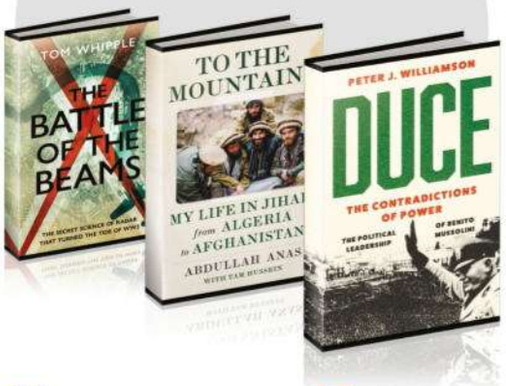
HOME FRONT

74 WWII THIS MONTH

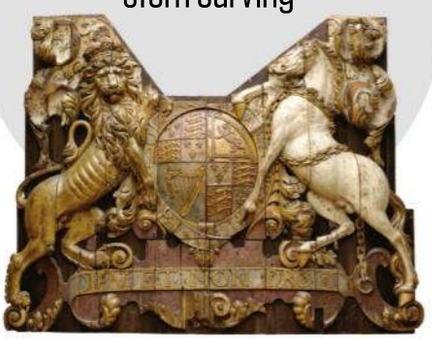
In June 1943 partisans of the Greek People's Liberation Army struck a number of successful attacks against occupying Italian forces

72
Museums and Events

76
This month's military history book reviews



82
Artefact of War: HMS Royal Charles stern carving



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MUSEUMS & EVENTS

Discover the Imperial War Museum's new exhibition on the Troubles, Jersey's largest castle and the Welsh regiment that inspired WWI poets

Living with the Troubles

The Imperial War Museum has opened a new exhibition about Northern Ireland's recent history, 25 years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement

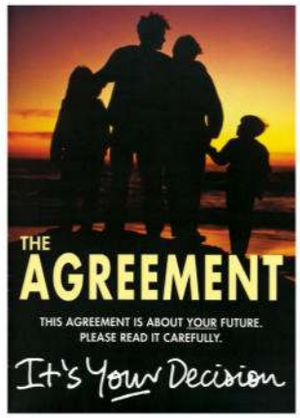
The Troubles engulfed Northern Ireland in conflict for nearly 30 years. It was – and remains – a contentious period, with roots going back centuries. A ceasefire was signed in 1998 but many aspects of the conflict remain unresolved to this day and are highly contested by those who experienced and participated in it.

Opening at IWM London, Northern Ireland: Living with the Troubles (26 May 2023 – 7 January 2024) unpacks this complex chapter of our shared history through the multiple perspectives of individuals affected by the conflict. Showcasing recently collected objects and new first-hand testimony, this free exhibition is IWM's first on the subject and will shine a light on the different narratives that have allowed people who lived through the conflict to share their version of events.

While there are key moments that make up the history of the Troubles, there is often no single story that everyone involved can agree on. People have different perspectives on what took place. Rather than offer a narrative history of the conflict, this exhibition introduces four themes: the night of 27-28 June 1970; the heightened violence of the 1970s and 1980s; the everyday experience for those affected by the Troubles; and the legacy of the conflict within Northern Ireland today. These will explore the events, communities and paramilitary factions that underpin this difficult and complex 30-year period.

Visitors will hear from individuals on all sides of the conflict, from republican and loyalist paramilitaries to British soldiers, local police and ordinary civilians. These first-hand testimonies – recorded in 2022 for IWM's oral history collection – highlight what it was like to live through the Troubles. Recounting everyday scenes of violence and the reality of living among deeply divided communities, these different perspectives help us understand the nuances and challenges of this conflict and the motivations, hopes and fears felt by those closest to it.

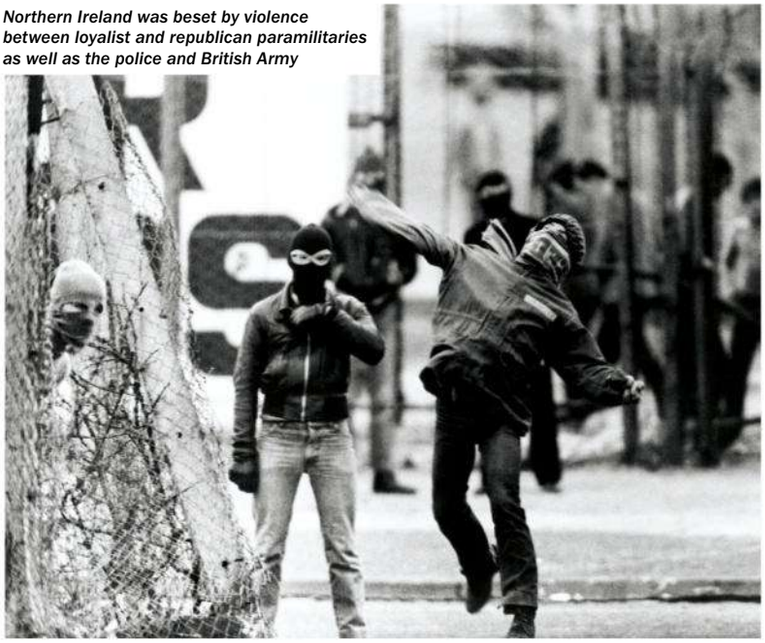
The exhibition will also present never-before-displayed objects in the museum. Acquired as part of an initiative to grow IWM's Northern Ireland collection, they cover the familiar: rubber bullets, propaganda posters and a Good Friday Agreement booklet. There are also rarer items such as a screen-printed handkerchief made by UVF paramilitaries in the Long Kesh prison. Alongside these, archival photography depicting hunger strike riots, streets lined with army checkpoints and wreckage of bombings paint a vivid picture of a country shaped by restrictions and torn apart by violence.



The cover of a 1998 booklet that spelt out the terms of what became known as the Good Friday Agreement

Craig Murray, curator of Living with the Troubles, says: "So much of what took place during the Troubles is contested. This complex conflict, which happened on our very own doorstep, is remembered differently by those who lived through it and little understood by many of those who didn't. In this exhibition, we hear from individuals who experienced the conflict first-hand. Sharing their stories is crucial to deepening understanding of this difficult period which is still felt in life and UK politics today."

For more information visit www.iwm.org.uk



Northern Ireland was beset by violence between loyalist and republican paramilitaries as well as the police and British Army

A British soldier pictured on patrol in a Northern Irish town

Ffiwsilwyr Brenhinol Cymreig

The Royal Welch Fusiliers Museum in Caernarfon Castle tells the story of Wales' oldest infantry regiment

Founded shortly after the Glorious Revolution in 1689, the Royal Welch Fusiliers (Ffiwsilwyr Brenhinol Cymreig) was a British Army infantry regiment that existed until 2006. Beginning with its baptism of fire during the Williamite War in Ireland (1689-91), the regiment served in almost every major conflict in modern British history. During its long history, it accumulated dozens of battle honours (including Blenheim, Waterloo, Inkerman, Mons and Normandy) with its soldiers being awarded 14 Victoria Crosses. During the First World War, the regiment also counted the famous war poets Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves among its ranks.

North Wales is the traditional home of the Royal Welch, with its regimental museum being housed in two towers of Caernarfon Castle, Gwynedd. It has a wealth of original exhibits that are supported by film, sound and models that tell the story of its 300 years of service. Visitors can also hear the words of Sassoon and Graves as well as other regimental writers such as Hedd Wyn, David Jones and Frank Richards.

The museum offers free tours and educational workshops for schools and home educators for up to 30 pupils for 90 minutes. All groups have the option to combine their tour with a visit through Caernarfon Castle. The museum additionally holds the regiment's archives at Wrexham Museum in Clwyd, with researchers being able to book by appointment.

***Right:** The regiment traditionally always kept a goat called Billy from 1775*

For more information visit
www.rwfmuseum.org.uk

Lé Vièr Châté

Mont Orgueil is a magnificent medieval castle that was originally built by King Philip II of France and later garrisoned by the Wehrmacht

Located on Jersey, the largest of the Channel Islands, Mont Orgueil is a castle with over 800 years of history. It overlooks the eastern port of Gorey and was first built by King Philip II of France from 1204 following the French conquest of Normandy. The castle was fought over by English and French forces for centuries before coming under permanent English control.

Sometimes known as Gorey Castle by English speakers, Mont Orgueil is also called lé Vièr Châté (the Old Castle) by those who speak Jèrriais – the traditional Norman language of Jersey.

Extensively renovated during the 16th century, Mont Orgueil was a Royalist fortress during the British Civil Wars before it was captured by Parliament in 1651. It was garrisoned by German artillery units during the Nazi occupation of the Channel Islands and has been managed by the Jersey Heritage Trust since 1994.

There are almost 200 steps to the top of the castle where visitors can take in one of the best views in Jersey, including across to France. The interiors of Mont Orgueil contain specially commissioned artwork that tells its story. The castle also holds regular events such as living history and from 2 May – 26 September 2023 visitors can meet Jean Simon, the castle falconer who gives talks and displays with his hawk Sovereign.

Mont Orgueil overlooks the picturesque surroundings of Gorey harbour

For more information visit www.jerseyheritage.org

Images: Alamy, Getty, Wiki / PD / Gov, Imperial War Museum

WWII THIS MONTH...

JUNE 1943

To commemorate 80 years since the Second World War, **History of War** will be taking a look at some of the key events taking place during each month of the conflict

PORTA AND SARANTAPOROS

The Greek People's Liberation Army (ELAS) achieved two successes in June 1943 when they defeated Italian and German forces in separate battles. During 8-9 June, around 250 ELAS partisans fought thousands of Italian soldiers at the Battle of Porta. Although the Greeks were forced to withdraw, they inflicted casualties on regular Italian Army forces for the first time in a full-on attack instead of a hit-and-run ambush.

On 21 June, ELAS ambushed a German supply column at the Battle of Sarantaporos. Part of the British Special Operations Executive's Operation Animals sabotage mission, ELAS detonated explosives under German trucks that contained fuel and ammunition. Only five Germans escaped, with dozens more killed or captured. The prisoners were later executed by ELAS.

Images © Alamy, Getty

Jewish Sonderkommando forced labourers pictured at Bełzec before it was fully converted into an extermination camp

CLOSURE OF BEŁŻEC

Operational from March 1942, Bełzec was a Nazi extermination camp in eastern Poland. Built by the SS, the camp was part of Operation Reinhard – a secret plan to murder all Polish Jews. During March-December 1942, the Nazis deported c.434,500 Jews, along with Roma Gypsies and some non-Jewish Poles, to Bełzec, where they were killed in gas chambers.

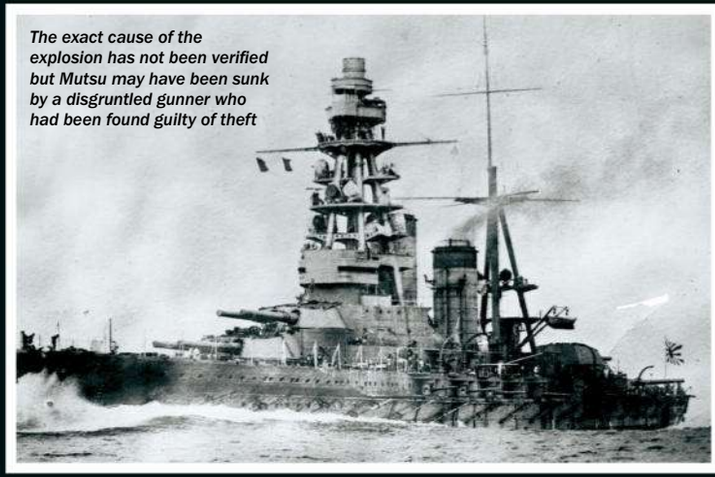
After the discovery of the Soviet-orchestrated massacre of Polish officers and intelligentsia in the Katyn Forest, the Nazis decided to destroy the mass graves of those they had killed at Bełzec. Jewish prisoner labourers (known as Sonderkommando) were forced to exhume and cremate countless bodies in late June 1943 to destroy evidence of the Nazis' crimes. The Sonderkommando were then put on the last train out of Bełzec to Sobibór extermination camp, where they were themselves killed.

Italian soldiers pictured marching through a Greek settlement in 1943

SINKING OF THE MUTSU

A Nagato-class dreadnought battleship, Mutsu had been commissioned in the Imperial Japanese Navy since 1921. With an overall length of 708ft (216m) and a displacement of over 39,000 tonnes at full load, this huge ship had a crew of 1,475 men by 1942.

Mutsu saw action at the Battles of Midway and Eastern Solomons before returning to Japan in early 1943. While it was moored at Hashira Island in Hiroshima Bay, Mutsu sank on 8 June 1943 after the ammunition magazine exploded in her third turret. The explosion tore the ship in two and the large influx of water caused it to sink quickly, killing 1,121 sailors, flying cadets and instructors. There were only 353 survivors.



The exact cause of the explosion has not been verified but Mutsu may have been sunk by a disgruntled gunner who had been found guilty of theft

NEWMAN AND THE NAVY

Aged just 18, the future Oscar-winning American actor Paul Newman (1925 – 2008) joined the US Navy on 6 June 1943. He initially wanted to become a pilot but did not have the appropriate mathematical skills, so he retrained as a radioman-rear gunner for naval aircraft.

After qualifying in 1944, Newman was deployed to the Pacific Theatre as an aviation radioman third class. He served in torpedo-bomber squadrons and flew as a turret gunner in a Grumman TBF Avenger. Assigned to the aircraft carrier USS Bunker Hill, Newman was grounded shortly before the Battle of Okinawa after his Avenger pilot developed an ear infection. The rest of their squadron flew from Bunker Hill and many were killed in a Japanese kamikaze attack on the ship.

***Right:** Paul Newman's official US Navy photograph portrait*

Howard was a WWI veteran and played British officer Captain Fred Allison in the 1933 American POW drama Captured!

DEATH OF LESLIE HOWARD

Twice nominated for the Academy Award for Best Actor, Leslie Howard (1893 – 1943) was one of the most famous Hollywood stars of the 1930s. Best known for playing Ashley Wilkes in *Gone With The Wind*, Howard was a British-Jewish actor who returned to Britain to assist the war effort.

Howard starred in several anti-Nazi propaganda films, including *The First of the Few* and *Pimpernel Smith*, and may also have served as a spy. In May 1943, he travelled to neutral Portugal to promote the British cause. He boarded a passenger Douglas DC-3 aircraft to fly back to the UK from Lisbon on 1 June 1943, but the aircraft was shot down by German Junkers Ju 88 fighter-bombers over the Bay of Biscay. All 17 passengers and crew, including Howard, were killed.

REVIEWS

Our pick of the latest military history books

LEYTE GULF A NEW HISTORY OF THE WORLD'S LARGEST SEA BATTLE

THIS FRESH EXAMINATION OF THE BATTLE'S MAJOR DECISIONS CHALLENGES LONG-HELD ASSERTIONS

Author: Mark E Stille **Publisher:** Osprey Publishing **Price:** £25 (Hardback), £11.38 (Kindle) **On Sale:** Out now

For any Second World War enthusiast, the Battle of Leyte Gulf is of particular interest. The largest sea battle in history, Leyte Gulf was actually a series of smaller engagements between the US Navy and the Imperial Japanese Navy that swirled around the invasion of the island of Leyte in the Philippines, site of the American landings in October 1944, and the promised return of General Douglas MacArthur.

Leyte Gulf has been visited and revisited by historians, and the pivotal engagement has been thoroughly explored prior to the publication of Mark E Stille's *Leyte Gulf: A New History of the World's Largest Sea Battle*. But those who might think this endeavour is a rehash of the story with nothing new to offer should think again.

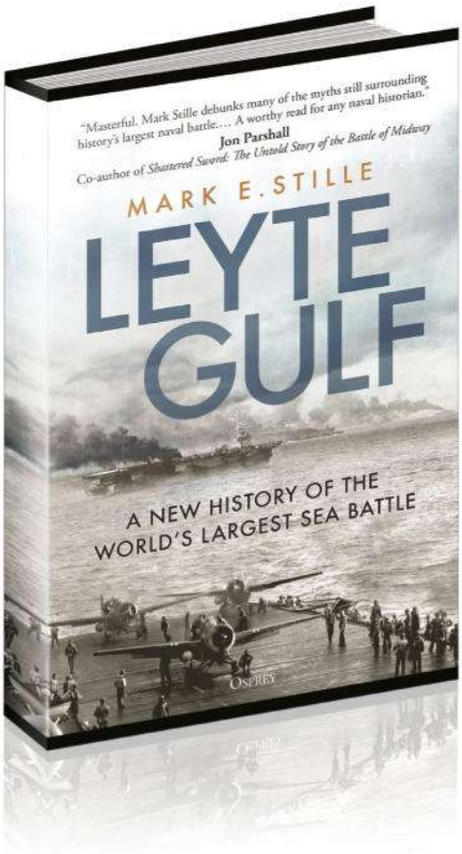
Stille provides much more than a shallow overview of the Battle of Leyte Gulf. The research and analysis invested in this work go far beyond a repetition of the same saga. Stille does describe the decision-making process of Admiral William F Halsey in his questionable northward movement with the aircraft carriers and fast battleships of the Third Fleet on a mission to annihilate Admiral Jisaburo Ozawa's Japanese decoy force off Cape Engano; however, he provides a lucid perspective on the real-time situation rather than the same conclusions and criticism of Halsey's decision that have been codified for nearly 80 years.

"Accepted wisdom is that Halsey acted stupidly on the night of October 24 when he decided to take the Third Fleet north to attack the Japanese carrier force," writes Stille. "The author believes Halsey acted correctly with the information he had available at the time." Such an assertion is, in itself, worth the price of admission to delve into the reasoning behind this perhaps startling conclusion. For taking the leap and backing up his statement with evidence, Stille is to be applauded.

The author goes further in analysing the heroism of Admiral Clifton AF Sprague, his 'small boy' escort carriers of Taffy 3, and their screen of destroyers and destroyer escorts that faced the overwhelming firepower of Admiral Takeo Kurita's fleet in the stirring Battle off Samar. He discusses the key role that American carrier-based air power played in the battle while acknowledging the supreme courage and fortitude displayed by the American sailors against long odds. He also tackles another decision often criticised through the decades, that of Kurita to break off the engagement rather than continuing to run the gauntlet toward the invasion beaches to descend on defenceless transports and cargo vessels like a "hawk among chickens." Stille's interpretation of this episode and his assessment of the Japanese performance off Samar are illuminating.

Of course, Stille allocates proper treatment to the other engagements that comprise the totality of the Battle of Leyte Gulf, including the submarine action in the Palawan Passage, the fighting in the Sibuyan Sea and the revenge of the Pearl Harbor survivors – old battleships raised and refitted – as Admiral Jesse Oldendorf led them in a pounding of Japanese warships in Surigao Strait.

While some may have thought the story of Leyte Gulf had been told and the proverbial book closed, Stille presents a fresh perspective of the epic battle, a look that's worthy of praise both for taking on the immense topic to begin with and also for the resulting book, which is a triumph. **MH**


"Masterful. Mark Stille debunks many of the myths still surrounding history's largest naval battle.... A worthy read for any naval historian."
Jon Parshall
Co-author of Shattered Sword: The Untold Story of the Battle of Midway
MARK E. STILLE
LEYTE GULF
A NEW HISTORY OF THE WORLD'S LARGEST SEA BATTLE
OSPREY

A huge explosion rips through the USS St Louis after it is hit by a Japanese kamikaze plane, killing 15 sailors and wounding 43

The aircraft carrier USS Lexington comes under attack from a Japanese aircraft during the Battle of Leyte Gulf in October 1944

Images: Getty

TO THE MOUNTAINS

A FIRST-HAND ACCOUNT OF THE AFGHAN-SOVIET WAR AND ITS ROLE IN RALLYING ISLAMISTS FROM ACROSS THE WORLD – BY A JIHADIST WHO TOOK PART

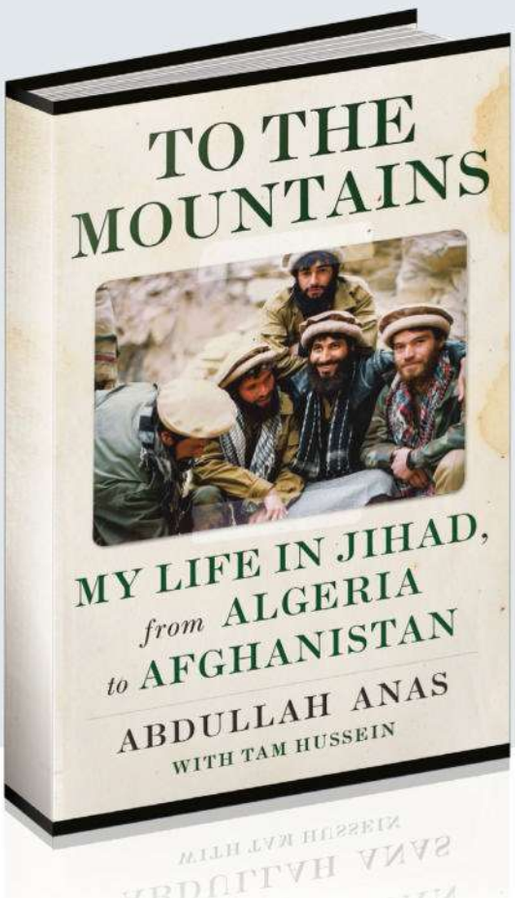
Author: Abdullah Anas **Publisher:** Hurst
Price: £15.99 (Paperback) **On sale:** Out now

Algerian Islamist Abdullah Anas was one of the earliest of the Arabs to join the Afghan Jihad and counted as brothers-in-arms the future leaders of al-Qaeda's global war, from Abdullah Azzam to Osama bin Laden. His experience in Afghanistan led him to befriend key Afghan resistance leaders, such as Ahmad Shah Massoud.

This book, co-authored with investigative journalist Tam Hussein, tells the story of how Anas distanced himself from the extremist trajectories of jihad and eventually came to disagree with their interpretations of political Islam. While Anas remains committed to jihad, he still takes issue with the fanatical trajectories of his one-time companions. The narrative is essentially an intimate portrait of the networks that came into being during the Afghan-Soviet war and how Anas' contact with them led to a rethink of what it means to be a jihadist in the modern world.

Anas left for the mountains of Afghanistan to join the fight against the Soviet invaders and, in his own words, "achieve martyrdom". He acknowledges the irony in his experience having turned him into a fighter "so vehemently opposed to bloodshed". His "awakening" came with the fall of Kabul in 1989 to the forces of Islamist fanaticism, which inspired him to ponder how to create a stable body politic that respects life, dignity and belief.

For Anas, understanding what happened in Afghanistan is key to comprehending what is currently going on in the Muslim world, with particular reference to jihadism. His conviction that the jihadist movement created by bloodthirsty extremists is truly finished remains an open question. **JS**



HITLER'S PANZER GENERALS

PREVIOUSLY UNPUBLISHED MATERIAL PROMISES TO SHED NEW LIGHT ON SOME OF THE TOP COMMANDERS IN HITLER'S WEHRMACHT, WHO WERE CRITICAL TO THE DOOMED INVASION OF THE SOVIET UNION

Author: David Stahel **Publisher:** Cambridge University Press
Price: £30 (Hardback) **On sale:** Out now

David Stahel has unearthed unpublished private correspondence of four of Hitler's Panzer Army generals – Heinz Guderian, Erich Hoepner, Georg-Hans Reinhardt and Rudolf Schmidt – and has used them to offer new insight into pivotal events of the Second World War.

This reviewer was initially dreading that it would be written in the dry academic structure of many published PhD theses, but our fears were unfounded. The author is skilled in analysing new facts and presenting them in a fascinating style that introduces historical events and then explores what the generals had to say about them in their private letters.

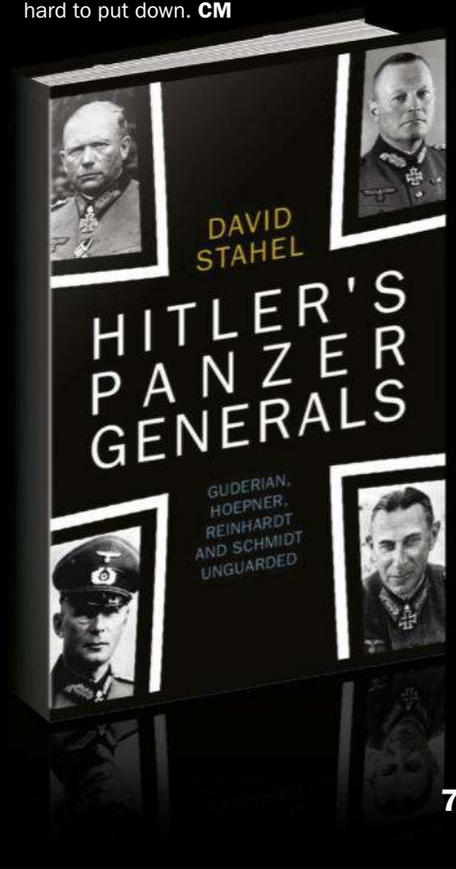
Although the author briefly covers each general's life before the start of the Second World War, he states that he doesn't want the book to be a biography of the men. He concentrates on the war years and what the contents of these letters can do to increase our understanding of the conditions these men fought under, and the political and moral pressures they had to deal with. Some old myths are dealt with and new interpretations discussed.

Reading the private letters to and from their family humanises the generals. During the Soviet counter-attacks in the bitterly cold winter of 1941, where German soldiers were battling the extreme weather as well as the enemy, many suffered war fatigue. Earlier biographers who were allowed access to some of the letters, while the documents were in the care of family members, had to write their books subject to certain conditions. They could not portray their subjects in a negative fashion. Since the letters belonging to the four generals have now been donated to German national archives those restrictions no longer apply and, for the first time, the author has been able to give a more accurate assessment of the topic.

The generals attended a briefing prior to the execution of Operation Barbarossa, the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union that started on 22 June 1941. Hitler instructed his men to exterminate the scourge of Soviet Bolshevik political officers and ruthlessly deal with all Soviet soldiers and civilians. The generals' letters help readers understand how this instruction was interpreted.

Stahel doesn't pull any punches when covering the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime, and the generals' complicity in war crimes is dealt with in depth. Even if units under their command were not directly involved at certain periods of time, the author discusses the slaughter committed by the SS units following the main advance. He concludes that the generals all knew what was happening and did nothing to stop it.

At the back of the book there is an in-depth 40-page notes section listing all the page notes and historical source documents as well as published book page references. This is followed by a 20-page bibliography covering archive primary sources and secondary sources. This is an outstanding academic piece of research that's written in an accessible, comprehensive way, making the book hard to put down. **CM**



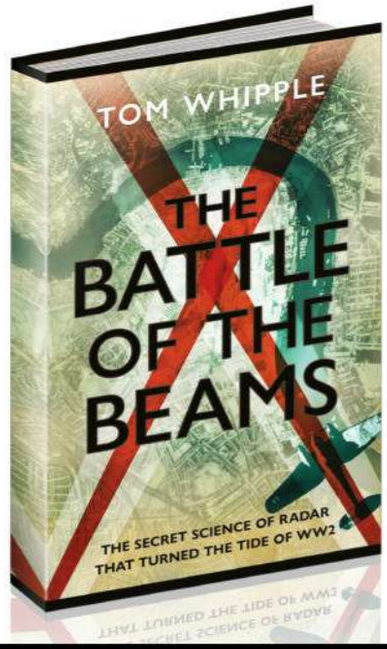
THE BATTLE OF THE BEAMS

REVEALING THE SECRET SCIENCE OF RADAR THAT CHANGED THE COURSE OF WWII

Author: Tom Whipple **Publisher:** Bantam **Price:** £20 (Hardback) **On Sale:** Out now

For years, the role played by British boffins during the Second World War went largely ignored. As official documents became increasingly accessible, however, the stories of mavericks like Alan Turing, Barnes Wallace and Solly Zuckerman all gradually came to light. This excellent book by *The Times* science editor Tom Whipple now makes use of recently released government papers to help tell the story of another wartime scientist: Reginald Jones.

Jones was only 28 years old when, in June 1940, he was summoned to Downing Street by Winston Churchill for a meeting with the RAF's top brass and government ministers. As a scientist, Jones was there to offer some insight into whether the German Luftwaffe could use radio waves to guide their bombers over targets in Britain. When asked his opinion, Jones grabbed centre stage and lectured the room for the next 20 minutes about how it was not only possible but that it was being done. His ideas were met with scepticism by everyone in the room except Churchill.



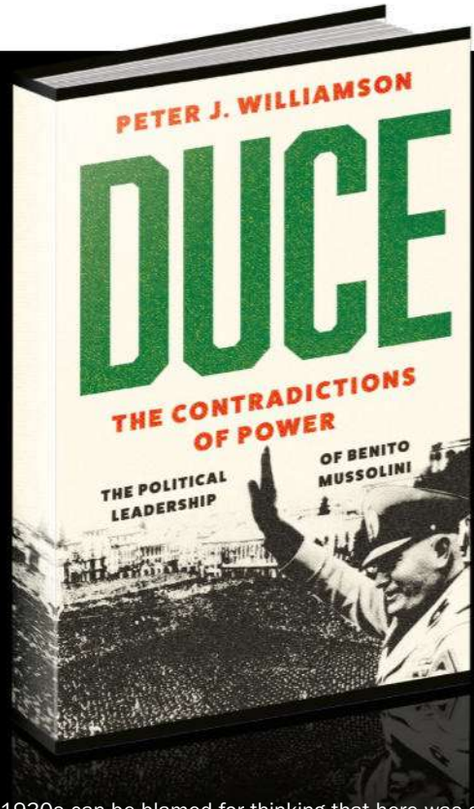
In many ways, this episode sums up Jones' story. His was a classic boffin's tale: Jones as the brilliant, if arrogant, scientist battling not just German technical ingenuity but British bureaucracy and exceptionalism. The book details how he then went on to prove his theories right, outwit the Nazi scientists he was up against and ultimately save thousands of lives.

Fascinating, accessible and packed with plenty of high-stakes drama, this is one of the great lost stories of the Second World War. **NS**

DUCE

AN EXPLORATION INTO THE ONGOING CONTROVERSY SURROUNDING BENITO MUSSOLINI'S DICTATORSHIP, FROM HIS ABILITY TO NURTURE AND ENFORCE HIS PERSONAL POWER TO HIS INABILITY TO ACHIEVE HIS GOALS

Author: Peter J. Williamson **Publisher:** Hurst & Co
Price: £30 (Hardback) **Released:** Out now



It would be simplistic to write off Benito Mussolini as the Italian fascist dictator who joined the wrong side in the Second World War and paid for his mistake with his life. This is all true, yet as Peter J Williamson brings to light in his book, there was a great deal more to Il Duce, who ruled his country for nearly a quarter of a century before his capture and summary execution by Italian partisans.

Mussolini founded his Partito Nazionale Fascista (PNF) in 1921 and the following year King Victor Emmanuel III charged him to head an Italian coalition government. Four years later, having swept aside his political opponents, Il Duce proclaimed himself dictator, promising to unite the Italian people in every aspect of their lives and prepare them for global greatness.

There is ample historical evidence to show that Mussolini was held in high esteem by large segments of Italian society. As the author states: "No one seeing films of crowds cheering Mussolini's speeches… in the 1930s can be blamed for thinking that here was a leader who seemingly enjoyed significant popular appeal." Il Duce had the ability to create his own myth. Even Winston Churchill claimed that after years of reform and modernisation, Mussolini's one fatal mistake was to ally himself with the Axis powers.

Williamson's detailed analysis reveals that despite Mussolini's apparent widespread appeal as a benefactor, his rule marked a definitive reversal in Italy's trend of democratic and social progress. It was the cataclysmic dislocation and strife of the 1914-22 period that set the context for the rise of fascism and hence of Mussolini. **JS**

WIN AN AIRFIX 617 SQN DAMBUSTERS 80TH ANNIVERSARY GIFT SET

WORTH £54.99

History of War readers have the chance to win one of two model sets in tribute to the anniversary of RAF 617 Squadron

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Terms & conditions The competition is open to UK entrants only. Under 18s must obtain parental consent to enter this competition and be able to demonstrate this to History of War's reasonable satisfaction. Answers must be received by 00:00GMT on 06/07/2023. The winner will be selected at random from all entries received and will be sent the prize free of charge. The prize is non-transferable and non-refundable. There is no cash alternative. For full terms and conditions, please go to www.futureplc.com/competition-rules/.

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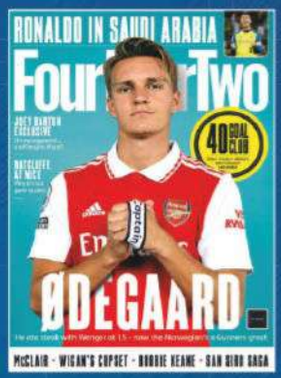

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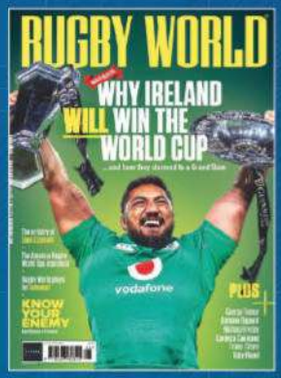

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HMS ROYAL CHARLES STERN CARVING

Captured by the Dutch during their famous raid on the Medway, this British royal coat of arms is the only surviving piece of King Charles II's flagship

Charles II's coat of arms includes heraldic motifs that represent his three crowns of England, Scotland and Ireland as well as fleur-de-lis for his ancestral claim to the kingdom of France

Image: Rijksmuseum

An 80-gun ship of the line, HMS Royal Charles was launched in 1655 during the republican Commonwealth of England. Originally named Naseby after Parliament's victory over King Charles I, the ship was renamed HMS Royal Charles after the restoration of King Charles II to his thrones in 1660.

Royal Charles transported the restored king from exile in the Netherlands back to England in May 1660 and became his flagship in the Royal Navy. It saw action in three battles during the Second Anglo-Dutch War (1665-67), including the Battle of Lowestoft where she was commanded by Charles' younger brother, the future King James II.

In June 1667, Dutch ships sailed up the Rivers Thames and Medway in southern England and bombarded Chatham and Sheerness. The Dutch attacked the Royal Navy with fire ships and destroyed 12 English vessels. Two other English ships were captured and towed back to the Netherlands, including the Royal Charles.

The Raid on the Medway was one of the most serious defeats for England within its own territory for centuries. The triumphant Dutch displayed HMS Royal Charles at the port of Hellevoetsluis for six years as a trophy. She was broken up for scrap in 1673 but the Dutch preserved Charles II's large coat of arms that adorned the stern of the ship. The carving has since become the most visible symbol of the famous Dutch victory against the English and it is now exhibited in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. Nevertheless, the Dutch did return a mirror from HMS Royal Charles to Britain as a goodwill gesture in 2012.

RIJKS MUSEUM

HMS Royal Charles' stern carving is displayed in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam – the national museum of the Netherlands

www.rijksmuseum.nl

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